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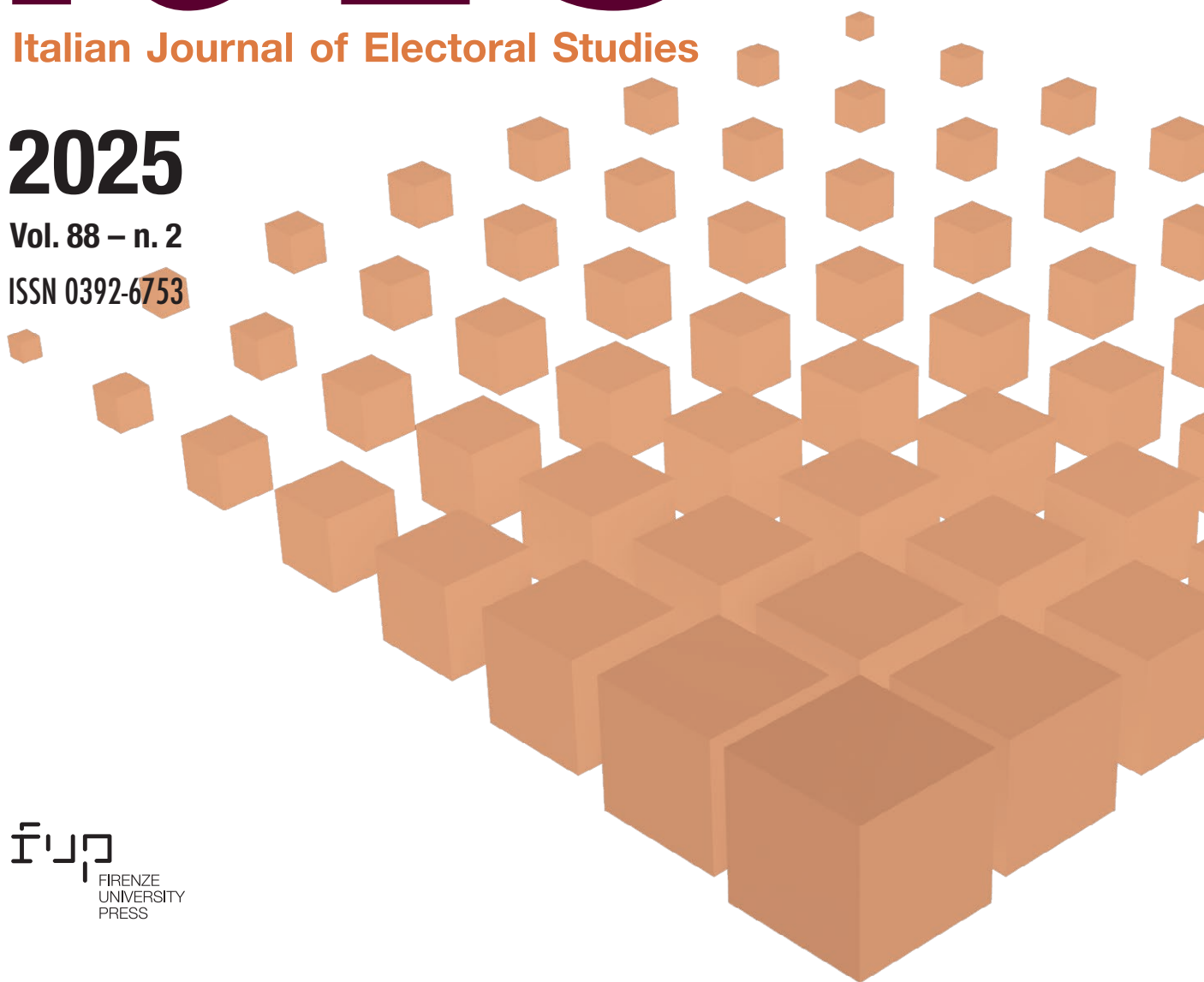
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Matching expectations: how issue congruence drives satisfaction with democracy

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Abstract. This study investigates how issue congruence between citizens and political parties affects satisfaction with democracy (SWD) in France, Germany and Italy. Using data from the 2019 European Election Study and the Chapel Hill Expert Survey, the analysis focuses on three key policy domains, economy, immigration and the environment, and tests whether higher positional alignment within party-citizen dyads is associated with greater democratic satisfaction. Findings from ordered logistic regression (OLR) models show that issue congruence is positively associated with SWD, particularly on identity-related and transnational issues such as immigration and the environment. The study also introduces an original salience index which combines party-level issue emphasis with citizens' media exposure to examine whether issue salience moderates this relationship. Results indicate that, when an issue is highly salient, the positive effect of congruence weakens, suggesting that heightened attention may raise citizens' expectations and make representational gaps more visible. These findings highlight the contextual and issue-specific dynamics underlying democratic satisfaction in European multiparty systems.

Keywords: responsiveness, public opinion, satisfaction with democracy, representation, salience.

INTRODUCTION

Satisfaction with democracy (SWD) is a key aspect of political science research because it serves as a crucial indicator of democratic legitimacy and stability (Dalton, 2003; Linde & Ekman, 2003; Norris, 1999). In the literature, SWD is commonly viewed as a reflection of political support and the overall political well-functioning of a democratic society (Aarts and Thomasen 2008; Anderson and Guillory, 1997; Reher, 2015). Research on SWD has developed considerably to include the examining of both institutional and individual-level determinants that shape citizens' evaluations of their democratic systems (Cutler et al., 2023; Valgarðsson & Devine, 2022). A considerable amount of SWD research has focused on institutional factors, such as electoral systems, government effectiveness and democratic performance (Armingeon & Guthmann, 2014; Dalton, 2004; Magalhaes, 2014; Singh & Mayne, 2024; Torcal & Trechsel, 2016; van Houwelingen & Dekker, 2021).

At the individual level, research has shown that SWD is influenced by a variety of factors, including voting for government parties and the winner-loser effect, individuals' economic conditions, political interest, education and overall satisfaction (Hobolt, 2012; Hobolt et al., 2021; Kim, 2009; Loveless & Binelli, 2020; Ridge, 2023; Rohrschneider, 2005; Valgarðsson & Devine, 2022). Moreover, SWD acts as an explanatory factor that affects political participation, trust in democratic institutions and the quality of representation (Curini et al., 2012; Ezrow & Xezonakis, 2011; Kim, 2009; Reher, 2015).

Empirical research has also shown that citizen's satisfaction with democracy is improved when there is "alignment" between the public and political parties (Mayne & Hakhverdian, 2017). Research has shown that individuals who perceive greater congruence with representatives tend to express higher levels of democratic satisfaction (Ferland 2021; Reher 2015). The concept of congruence (Miller & Stokes 1963; Verba & Nie 1972; Whalke 1971) has been examined along several dimensions, including ideological or positional alignment (Arnold & Franklin 2012; Golder & Stramski 2010; Powell 2009), priority congruence (Giger & Lefkofridi, 2014; Hobolt et al., 2021; Reher, 2015), policy congruence (Carrieri & Morini, 2022; Ferland 2021), and multidimensional citizen-government agreement (Stecker & Tausendpfund, 2016). These studies share a common emphasis on political issues as dimensions along which citizen preferences are formed, expressed, and ultimately represented (Downs 1957; Stokes 1963). Moreover, they identify congruence between parties positions and citizens' preferences as a central factor in understanding satisfaction with democracy (Ferrin & Kriesi, 2025).

This study contributes to this growing body of work by focusing on issue congruence – defined as the alignment between citizens' preferences and party positions on policy issues – as a crucial explanatory variable for SWD. Building on existing research, we examine how issue congruence shapes SWD across three policy domains, the economy, immigration and the environment, in France, Germany and Italy. Using data from the 2019 European Election Study and the 2019 Chapel Hill Expert Survey, the study tests the hypothesis that higher issue congruence on specific issues corresponds to higher SWD. It also examines how salience moderates this effect, so further refining our understanding of democratic satisfaction in a comparative European context. The results show that the effect of issue congruence on SWD varies according to the characteristics of the issues and the national context.

The paper is structured as follows: the Introduction reviews previous research on the determinants of SWD.

The second section examines the literature on the influence of issue congruence on SWD and the relevance of issue salience, so presenting the hypotheses. The third section outlines the data and methods used in the study. The fourth section presents the results while the fifth section interprets the findings and draws conclusions.

Can issue congruence affect satisfaction with democracy?

Despite general and persistent disillusionment with the functioning of democracies in Western countries (Dahlberg et al., 2015, Singh, 2018, Webb, 2013), research has shown that citizens' satisfaction with democracy depends on the quality of representation: the closer citizens' preferences are to those of parties and governments, the greater their satisfaction (Ezrow & Xezonakis, 2011; Hobolt et al., 2021).

Issue congruence has emerged as a particularly salient factor in the study of SWD, as citizens are more likely to express satisfaction when they perceive that their views are reflected in party positions, so indicating ideological congruence (Ferland, 2021; Reher, 2015). When political parties adopt positions on key issues that are in line with public opinion, citizens tend to feel better represented and consequently more satisfied with democracy (André & Depauw, 2017; Kim, 2009). This effect has been shown to be particularly relevant when issue congruence is assessed within specific policy domains, where the alignment between citizens' and parties' positions becomes more concrete and politically meaningful (Giger & Lefkofridi, 2014). However, discrepancies between citizens' preferences and policy outcomes can lead to disillusionment and undermine democratic legitimacy (Dahlberg et al., 2015; Tsai & Tan, 2023). Misperceptions of congruence also play a critical role as individuals who mistakenly believe their views are underrepresented may exhibit lower levels of SWD, regardless of actual policy alignment (Carroll et al., 2024).

Based on this literature, we expect a positive relationship between issue congruence and satisfaction with democracy across different party-citizen pairings:

H1. *Within party-citizen dyads, higher levels of positional issue congruence are positively associated with the likelihood of greater satisfaction with democracy.*

In addition to this general trend, cross-national studies show that the effect of issue congruence on satisfaction with democracy is often issue-specific (Hobolt et al., 2021; Reher, 2015). For example, the nature and characteristics of the issue at hand play a crucial role in determining the strength of this relationship (Leiter

and Clark, 2015; Vasilopoulou & Zur, 2024). According to the literature, valence issues, such as the economy, tend to generate consensus on desired goals (e.g., economic growth or stability), but divergent views on how to achieve them complicate the relationship between issue congruence and democratic satisfaction (Abney et al. 2011; Cox & Béland, 2012; Evrenk, 2018). In contrast, positional issues, such as immigration, are characterized by clear ideological cleavages, meaning that the alignment between citizens and political parties on such issues is more easily discernible and often stronger (Hutter & Kriesi, 2022). Similarly, issues with high electoral potential, such as environmental policies, may drive a different dynamic as they often focus on long-term goals with significant public support (De Sio & Weber, 2020; Halla et al., 2013; Wagner & Schnieder, 2006).

These variations suggest that the relationship identified in H1 is not constant across domains, but instead contingent on the political and cognitive attributes of each issue. To capture this heterogeneity, we formulate a second hypothesis:

H2. *The strength of the effect of positional issue congruence and satisfaction with democracy varies across policy domains (immigration, economy, environment) as a consequence of the characteristics of the issue.*

In addition, existing scholarship highlights that the broader context of political representation can shape how party-citizen issue congruence relates to satisfaction with democracy. We anticipate cross-national variation in this relationship, as the effects of issue alignment are contingent on country-specific political, economic, and social factors (Cutler et al., 2023).

From a political perspective, countries differ in how party systems function and how policy preferences are aggregated. In systems characterised by party stability and policy continuity, such as Germany, the link between issue alignment and democratic satisfaction may be more consistent and predictable. In contrast, in more fragmented or volatile systems like Italy, the perceived instability of the political offer may weaken the connection between congruence and satisfaction, especially when citizens experience frequent shifts in party positions or government coalitions (Martini & Quaranta, 2020). These differences also reflect broader systemic logics: in consensual democracies with proportional representation and coalition governments, party-citizen congruence may be less directly translated into policy outcomes, potentially weakening its effect on satisfaction. In more majoritarian systems, by contrast, the visibility of programmatic competition and the concentration of power may strengthen the symbolic and evalua-

tive role of congruence (Torcal & Trechsel, 2016). Semi-presidential systems like France may instead highlight individual leadership and programmatic clarity, increasing the perceived relevance of party-citizen alignment.

Economic conditions also play a role. In relatively prosperous contexts, such as Germany, issue congruence may contribute positively to democratic evaluations, as citizens feel both represented and materially secure (van Erkel & van der Meer, 2016). In contrast, in countries experiencing economic stagnation or inequality, such as Italy, broader dissatisfaction with performance may overshadow representational considerations (Magalhães, 2014).

Socially, the nature and salience of public debates can influence how issue alignment is experienced. In countries where polarisation is high or where identity issues dominate the agenda—such as immigration in France or in Italy—alignment on specific issues may have a stronger impact on satisfaction, because it taps into core values or long-term concerns (Hutter & Kriesi, 2022; Reher, 2015).

These observations suggest that the relationship between issue congruence and satisfaction with democracy is not uniform across countries. Rather, it is embedded in national contexts that shape both the availability of congruence and its interpretive weight for citizens. Political institutions, economic performance, and the structure of public discourse jointly influence how representational alignment is perceived and evaluated (De Vries & Tillman, 2011; Wells & Kriekhaus, 2006). Accordingly, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3. *The effect of positional issue congruence on satisfaction with democracy varies across countries due to contextual differences in political systems and representational dynamics.*

The role of salience and media exposure

Citizens care not only about which policies are enacted, but also about which issues are prioritized in the political debate. Issue salience theories suggest that parties strategically mobilize voters by selectively emphasizing certain issues, knowing that the weight voters attach to these issues shapes their voting behaviour (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996; Dennison, 2019). For citizens' policy preferences to meaningfully influence their political attitudes, the issues they deem important must first enter the political agenda (Giger & Lefkofridi, 2014; Walgrave & Lefevere, 2013). This has led to a proliferation of studies on the "priority congruence" between citizens and parties, in which scholars are interested in understanding the closeness (or distance) between the two, not only on the left-right ideo-

logical axis (in terms of policies), but also in the very perception of the relevance of certain issues in the public debate (Gunderson, 2024; Reher, 2015; Vasilopoulou & Zur, 2024). Such studies have also focused on the “rivalry” between priorities and ideological positions in influencing support, voting behaviour and perceptions of the quality of democracy (Walgrave et al., 2020). More recently, studies have explored the relevance of salience in shaping parliamentary ability to respond to citizens’ demands through the category of issue responsiveness (Cavalieri et al., 2025). However, while issue salience has been widely studied as an outcome or explanatory variable of voting behaviour and political attitudes, few have considered its potential moderating role in the relationship between positional opinion congruence and satisfaction with democracy.

In this sense, media exposure is also relevant, not only for understanding how issues are framed, but also for assessing citizens’ actual reception of party communication – especially during campaigns – as it fosters political interest, enhances efficacy, strengthens preference-democracy links, and positively affects confidence in political institutions as well as satisfaction with democracy (Chang, 2017; Ceron & Memoli, 2015; Hollander, 2014). Indeed, extensive media exposure – particularly in polarized and conflictual contexts – may reinforce perceptions of a mismatch between citizens’ expectations and political outcomes, thereby negatively affecting democratic satisfaction (Strömbäck & Shehata, 2010; Stroud, 2008; Richter & Stier, 2022).

While one could also expect salience and information to increase awareness of political alignment and thus strengthen the effect of congruence, we argue that this dynamic depends on how clearly parties communicate their positions and how contested the issue is. In high-salience contexts, particularly on polarising or ambiguous issues, citizens who are more exposed to political information may become more sensitive to inconsistencies, strategic ambiguity, or shifts in party stances. Rather than simply reinforcing alignment, increased exposure can highlight complexity or divergence that would remain unnoticed under lower-salience conditions. Moreover, the assumption that higher salience always improves clarity may not hold uniformly. Parties often avoid taking unpopular or divisive positions explicitly, especially in public campaigns. As a result, even highly informed citizens may be confronted with conflicting signals or incomplete cues, making it more likely for them to notice discrepancies rather than consistency (Walgrave et al., 2020). Even when explicit party positions are absent or softened, informed citizens may still detect gaps between their expectations and par-

ty messaging, especially when issue salience is high and framing is contested.

By building on these considerations, the present study argues that positional congruence between parties and citizens will have a weaker positive effect on satisfaction with democracy when the issue is highly salient and citizens are more exposed to political information. This interaction may reduce the evaluative power of congruence by increasing the visibility of gaps, inconsistencies, or absences in party positioning.

Accordingly, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H4. *The effect of positional issue congruence on satisfaction with democracy weakens when issue salience and citizens’ exposure to political information are high.*

DATA AND METHODS

To test our hypotheses, we primarily used two datasets: the European Election Study (EES) dataset (Schmitt et al., 2022) and the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) (Bakker et al., 2020). For the demand-side EES, we used data on citizen positions regarding the economy (state control), immigration, and the environment from the 2019 Voter-Study. The primary advantage of the EES data lies in its cross-national nature as the same questions were generally posed to respondents a few months after the elections. The EES project is particularly important for our study because it collects data on citizens’ satisfaction with democracy and various indicators that allow the congruence of opinions between parties and citizens on several issues to be measured. The dataset contains crucial information on the preferences of European citizens from 28 democracies, from which we selected cases from Italy, France and Germany.

The choice of France, Germany and Italy as comparative cases is justified by both theoretical and empirical considerations and is particularly appropriate for a most different system design. While sharing key structural similarities as consolidated European democracies characterized by comparable socio-economic attributes, including population size, territorial size and economic development, these countries simultaneously present distinct institutional architectures and historical trajectories, thus offering significant analytical leverage. Specifically, France’s semi-presidential and highly centralized political system has generated distinct patterns of democratic satisfaction, often influenced by leadership styles, frequent government reshuffles and centralist traditions rooted in historical and administrative legacies (Bedock & Panel, 2017; Elgie, 2011). Germany, on the other hand, exemplifies a stable federal parliamentary democracy

based on cooperative federalism, proportional representation and consensual governance, often associated with consistently high levels of citizen satisfaction with democracy, although challenged by regional inequalities after reunification (Welsh, 2022). Italy, on the other hand, illustrates another variant as it is a parliamentary democracy that has been historically characterized by political fragmentation, chronic instability and significant institutional changes following the political upheavals of the 1990s, which have resulted in persistent public dissatisfaction with democratic performance (Morlino et al., 2013; Bellucci et al., 2021). It is precisely these institutional and historical divergences, combined with their common exposure to transnational policy challenges, such as migration, economic governance and environmental sustainability, that make France, Germany, and Italy ideal cases for studying how democratic satisfaction varies across different political systems and cultural contexts within Europe (Hutter & Kriesi, 2019).

The survey targeted the resident population aged 18 and over in the respective countries of the EU member states and consisted of responses to post-election questions conducted in the aftermath of the 2019 European Parliament elections.

The questions addressed to the sample cover a wide range of topics, including voting orientations, trust in institutions and the governance system, preferences on leaders and parties, and ideological positioning on a set of ten issues (including those of our interest). Respondents were asked to position themselves on these issues along a scale ranging from 0 to 10.

For the supply-side, data from the 2019 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) provided party positioning scales on the same issues. When combined with individual-level scales, this allowed us to develop variables measuring the party-voter distance. This was possible because the issue questions are posed in the same way in both datasets and the measurement scales are expressed within the same 0-10 intensity range, from “totally in favor” to “totally against” (with the exception of the immigration issue in CHES, which required a scale inversion recoding).

The dependent variable: SWD

The SWD level for citizens in the three countries was evaluated through the following question: “Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in your country? Are you... 1 very satisfied; 2 fairly satisfied; 3 not very satisfied; 4 not at all satisfied.” To ensure that higher values of the dependent variable correspond to higher levels of satisfaction with democracy, we recoded the original variable so that:

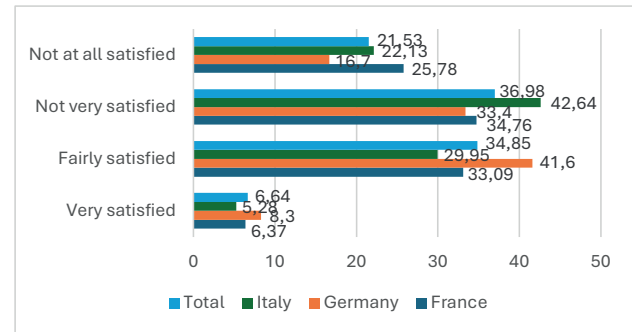


Figure 1. SWD in Italy, France and Germany (2019). Source: European Election Study 2019 – Voter Study

1 = not at all satisfied, 2 = not very satisfied, 3 = fairly satisfied, and 4 = very satisfied.

This recoded version of the SWD variable is used consistently in all statistical models and graphical outputs presented in the paper. Figure 1 shows the distribution of SWD responses across France, Germany and Italy in 2019. A comparative examination reveals significant differences in democratic satisfaction across the three countries. Citizens in Germany reported higher levels of satisfaction, with 41.6% choosing “fairly satisfied” and 8.3% “very satisfied,” which suggests a relatively strong legitimacy perception.

Conversely, respondents in Italy and France expressed lower satisfaction levels. Indeed, 42.64% of citizens in Italy indicated they were “not very satisfied,” which exceeds both France (34.76%) and Germany (33.4%). France reported the highest proportion of citizens who were “not at all satisfied” (25.78%), reflecting notable democratic discontent. These cross-national variations underline the importance of contextualizing SWD within specific institutional and socio-political settings, so supporting the use of this measure as a valuable comparative tool to capture nuances in citizens’ evaluations of democratic performance.

The independent variables: party-citizen dyads issue congruence (positional)

To test our hypotheses about the effect of issue congruence on SWD, we developed a set of party-citizen distance variables. These distance measures are based on the multidimensional approach proposed by Stecker and Tausendpfund (2016), whose results suggest that citizen-elite congruence on the left-right ideological scale has a larger effect on citizens’ satisfaction with democracy than other political dimensions. However, Ferland (2021) cautions about the precision of this method and notes that

researchers cannot be sure that a given position in the citizen survey represents the same substantive position in the expert survey, so raising concerns about differential item functioning. In our case, the identical wording of the questions and the precise overlap between the measurement scales lead us to believe that the dyadic variables we have derived are sufficiently precise.

The empirical goal here is to understand whether, and by how much, a set of issue-congruence variables can influence citizens' perceptions of the functioning of democracy in their country.

Regarding the distance variables on the economy, the EES surveys capture individual positions on a pro/anti state control scale ranging from 0 (entirely in favour of control) to 10 (entirely against state control of the economy) while CHES uses a 0-10 scale of party positions on general state intervention policies in the national economy. For the immigration distance variable, EES provides for citizen positions on a pro/anti-immigration scale from 0 (completely in favour of restrictive immigration policies) to 10 (completely against restrictive immigration policies) and CHES provides for party positions on the same scale (but inverted in intensity, hence the recoding). Finally, for the environmental opinion distance variable, both EES and CHES provide for positions on environmental sustainability, even at the expense of economic growth, expressed on an eleven-point scale from 0 ("Environmental protection should always have priority, even at the expense of economic growth") to 10 ("Economic growth should always have priority, even at the expense of environmental protection").

To make the positional scales congruent at the individual and party levels, they were standardized to obtain distance variables ranging from 0 to 1. Therefore, the Economy, Immigration and Environment congruence variables allowed us to identify the positional congruence between voters and parties, providing for all existing combinations in the positional distance between voter-party dyads. The thematic congruence variables derived are thus expressed as:

$$\text{Issue Congruence} = \text{abs}(\text{Citizen position} - \text{Party position}) / 10$$

It is worth noting that the three congruence variables - economic congruence, immigration congruence and environmental congruence - are weakly correlated, which justified their selection after consideration of demand-side salience.

Once all the independent congruence variables were created¹, we reshaped our dataset into a vertically con-

Table 1. Matrix of correlations.

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)
(1) Congruence on Immigration	1.000		
(2) Congruence on Economy	0.018	1.000	
(3) Congruence on Environment	0.036	0.093	1.000

catenated data matrix (by party), which allowed us to simultaneously test the impact of our independent variables on SWD for a large number of parties (see Appendix 2 for the full list of parties). Each respondent was multiplied by the number of parties under analysis (single respondent \times number of parties), so transforming the unit of analysis into the party-voter dyad. Finally, we included the variables in ordered logistic regression (OLR) models using the following formula:

$$SWD_{icp} = \alpha + \beta_1 econcongr_{icp} + \beta_2 immcongr_{icp} + \beta_3 envcongr_{icp} + \beta X_{ic} + \varepsilon$$

where SWD is a categorical variable ranging from 1 to 4 ("not at all satisfied", "not very satisfied", "fairly satisfied", "very satisfied"); β is an independent variable constructed as the distance between citizen and party opinions on an issue, varying by individual, country, and party; X_{ic} is a vector of individual characteristics, including control variables, that varies by individual and country; and ε is the stochastic error.

To capture transnational variations in the impact of the distance variables, we ran the regression models separately for each country, including the same control variables from the base model (see Models 3, 4, and 5) and adding the interaction effects present in Model 2. The direct effects of the three congruence variables and the most significant interaction effects are graphically represented and this allows us to present and discuss the results for the analyzed countries.

The control variables: retrospective economic evaluation, political interest and media exposure

Several control variables were included in the models following the principles of multivariate analysis, which emphasize the importance of controlling for potential confounding ('third') variables that could influence the observed relationships. Specifically, the model controlled for several socio-demographic vari-

captures the overall alignment between citizens and parties across the selected policy domains. The pooled congruence variable retains the same 0-1 scale as the original measures, where higher values indicate greater issue congruence. Results from the pooled model are consistent with those from the disaggregated models and are reported in the Appendix 1.A.

¹ In addition to the three issue-specific positional congruence variables (economy, immigration and environment), we constructed a pooled congruence measure to serve as a robustness check. This variable is calculated as the mean of the three individual congruence scores and

ables (age, sex, education and social class) and other perception-related factors such as retrospective economic evaluations, political interest and media exposure during the campaign. Citizens' retrospective evaluations of socio-economic performance are widely recognized as strong predictors of satisfaction with democracy (SWD), often outperforming other economic indicators (Dalton, 2004; Quaranta & Martini, 2016; Christmann, 2018; Kölln & Aarts, 2021). Furthermore, political interest is considered as a relevant explanatory factor for democratic (dis)satisfaction, as politically interested individuals generally show clearer perceptions of policy positions and government performance (Stecker & Tausendpfund, 2016; Mauk, 2021). Finally, media exposure during campaigns can enhance people's political knowledge and engagement, positively influencing satisfaction with democracy (Jerit et al., 2006; Strömbäck et al., 2016). A detailed operationalization of all control variables can be found in Appendix 6.

The moderator: salience index

A separate methodological discussion is necessary regarding the construction and operationalization of the moderator used in this study: the salience index. We constructed this index in two distinct steps. First, for each of the three selected policy domains, immigration, environment and economy, we multiplied party-level issue salience by individual-level media exposure (see Table 2 for descriptive statistics and Appendix 3 for detailed party salience data). It is worth noting that the choice of three policy domains was neither instrumental nor pre-determined, but rather derived from the "Most important problem" for the demand-side (Wlezien 2005). We therefore carried out a manual coding of over three thousand open-ended responses to the question: "What do you think is the most important problem facing your country today?", as the 2019 EES does not include pre-coding of responses to this question, unlike the 2009 and 2014 versions. This process produced around seventy categories from which the first three most important issues for citizens in the three countries (pooled) were identified (see Appendix): the economy (35.47%), immigration (15.77%) and the environment (14.08%).

Party-level issue salience was measured by using the 2019 Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) data, in which experts assessed how much emphasis each party placed on specific issues on a 0–10 scale. Individual-level media exposure was captured through respondents' answers to the question: "How closely did you follow the campaign ahead of the European Parliament elections in the media or on social media? Please indicate any number on an

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of media exposure (EES 2019) and issue salience in the party arena (CHES 2019)

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Media exposure	2941	5.90	2.90	0	10
Issue salience (parties)					
Europe integration	–	6.65	1.34	4	8.83
Gal/Tan	–	6.57	1.45	3.57	9.42
Multiculturalism	–	6.43	1.75	3	9.50
Economy	–	6.32	1.80	2.2	9.28
Immigration	–	6.30	2.12	2.87	9.94
Redistribution	–	5.89	2.10	1	9.20
Antielitism	–	5.14	3.17	0.75	10
Environment	–	5.12	2.43	1	10
Corruption	–	3.86	2.07	0	9.33

Note: *Media exposure* measured at the individual level (citizens) (EES 2019). *Issue salience* (parties) reflects party emphasis on issues according to CHES expert survey data (2019).

11-point scale," with "0" meaning "not at all" and "10" meaning "very closely".

This item combines general media exposure with explicit references to media sources (traditional and social), placing respondents within today's media environment, where influences and preference formation follow a cyclical rather than linear pattern (Druckman & Lupia, 2000; Richter & Stier, 2022; Messner & Distaso, 2008).

The same 'multilevel' logic guides the construction of our salience index, which effectively integrates the party dimension (party salience) with the individual dimension (media exposure), so providing a synthetic indicator which is suitable for analyzing effects within party-citizen dyads. In a second step, we introduced this salience index into a "super-interaction"², multiplying it by positional issue congruence variables (again separately for immigration, environment and economy).

This approach enabled us to test explicitly whether the impact of positional congruence on satisfaction with democracy varies depending on the combined salience of party-driven issue emphasis and citizens' media exposure.

RESULTS

The analysis assesses the impact of issue congruence on satisfaction with democracy (SWD) across eco-

² I am grateful to Bruno Cautrès for suggesting the term "super-interaction", to describe the statistical construction of the index used here capturing the interaction between the initial salience index (party salience × media exposure) and its further interaction with issue congruence variables. For similar approaches in related social science disciplines, see Jiang (2024); Zhao et al. (2023).

nomic, immigration and environmental domains by using a most different systems design that compares France, Germany and Italy. Table 3 presents the results of the ordered logistic regression models. In Model 1, congruence variables for immigration (0.338***) and the environment (0.257**) significantly predict higher SWD, so providing support for Hypothesis 1, which posits that higher levels of issue congruence between citizens and parties are associated with greater satisfaction with democracy. In contrast, economic congruence has no significant effect. This suggests that, across the three countries analyzed, congruence between party and citizen preferences on immigration and environmental issues plays a more decisive role in shaping democratic satisfaction than congruence on economic issues.

Regarding salience index controls in Model 1, higher immigration salience has a significant negative effect on SWD (-0.001^{**} , $p < 0.05$), indicating that higher values of the salience index – constructed as party-level issue salience multiplied by individual-level media exposure – are associated with lower satisfaction with democracy. Although the magnitude of this coefficient is small, the effect is noteworthy given the large sample size ($N=19,048$). The salience indices for the environment and the economy do not show significant effects in the baseline model. Among the controls, campaign media exposure is only significant in the Italian case and shows a negative effect, suggesting a country-specific dynamic that will be explored in the following section. Among the socio-demographic variables, gender is weakly significant, while education and age do not show robust effects.

Model 2 introduces interaction terms between issue congruence and their respective salience indices. This model tests whether the strength of the relationship between issue congruence and SWD depends on the salience of the issue, as perceived through the interaction of party emphasis and citizen media exposure. The interaction between immigration congruence and its salience is negative and highly significant (-0.008^{***}), so reinforcing the result found in the direct effect. This supports Hypothesis 4, which argues that the positive effect of issue congruence on satisfaction with democracy weakens when the issue becomes highly salient. A similar negative and significant interaction is found for the economy (-0.010^{**}), while the interaction for environmental congruence is not significant. These variations across issues provide support for Hypothesis 2, which posits that the strength of the congruence-SWD relationship depends on the nature of the issue.

Figure 2 displays the average marginal effects of issue-specific congruence on the predicted probability

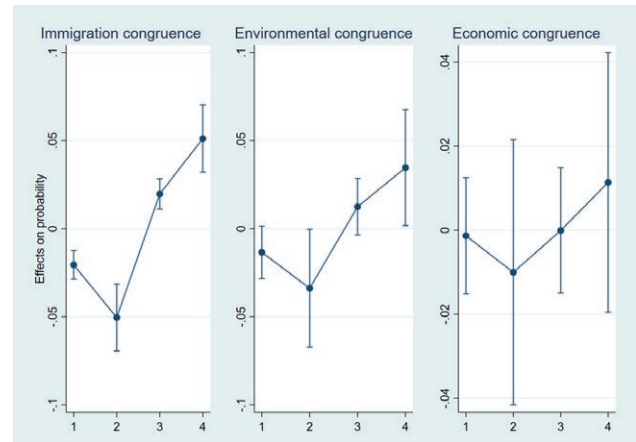


Figure 2. Marginal effects of Issue Congruence on SWD (pooled). Note: Average marginal effects of Issue Congruence on SWD (overall) with 95% CIs. Higher values of SWD indicate greater satisfaction with democracy (recoded scale).

of selecting each of the four SWD categories (1 = “not at all satisfied”, 4 = “very satisfied”). The results show that immigration and environmental congruence have consistent and significant effects on democratic satisfaction. In particular, higher congruence on these issues is associated with an increased likelihood of being “very satisfied” (category 4) and a decreased likelihood of being “not at all satisfied” (category 1), suggesting a strong evaluative impact. The effect of economic congruence, by contrast, appears weaker and statistically less robust, with wider confidence intervals and no clear pattern across satisfaction levels. This finding supports the idea that issue alignment on symbolic or identity-based issues may have a greater impact on citizens’ democratic evaluations than alignment on economic matters.

Country-specific models (Models 3–5) reveal further distinctions. In Italy (Model 3), only environmental congruence significantly predicts SWD ($p < 0.05$), so making the environment the strongest domain of congruence. This result stands out in light of the lack of effect for immigration and economic congruence. In France (Model 4), both immigration (0.630**) and environmental (0.710*) congruence are significant predictors, indicating that French voters associate democratic satisfaction with alignment on both issues. In Germany (Model 5), immigration (1.284***) and economic (0.647**) congruence have the strongest effects, while environmental congruence is not significant. Additionally, only Germany shows significant and positive effects of issue salience indices (0.006**), while salience moderators (immigration: -0.013^{***} ; economy: -0.011^{**}) show a significant and negative impact, again in line

Table 3. Determinants of SWD in Italy, France and Germany 2019 (Ordered Logistic Regression).

Variables	Model1	Model2	Model3	Model4	Model5
			Italy	France	Germany
Congruence on Immigration (citizens-party)	0.338*** (0.066)	0.697*** (0.160)	-0.112 (0.257)	0.630** (0.286)	1.284*** (0.268)
Congruence on Environment (citizens-party)	0.257** (0.126)	0.491** (0.214)	0.759** (0.363)	0.710* (0.365)	-0.029 (0.420)
Congruence on Economy (citizens-party)	0.034 (0.117)	0.476** (0.231)	0.323 (0.574)	0.513 (0.403)	0.647** (0.317)
Imm Salience Index	-0.001** (0.001)	0.002 (0.001)	-0.003 (0.002)	0.002 (0.002)	0.006** (0.003)
Env Salience Index	-0.000 (0.000)	0.002 (0.002)	0.005 (0.003)	0.001 (0.003)	-0.000 (0.002)
Econ Salience Index	0.001 (0.001)	0.004*** (0.002)	0.003 (0.003)	0.006* (0.003)	0.006*** (0.002)
Superinteraction Immigration		-0.008*** (0.003)	0.002 (0.004)	-0.009 (0.007)	-0.013*** (0.005)
Superinteraction Environment		-0.008 (0.005)	-0.007 (0.009)	-0.005 (0.009)	-0.004 (0.008)
Superinteraction Economy		-0.010** (0.004)	-0.010 (0.011)	-0.012 (0.008)	-0.011** (0.005)
Media Exposure	0.044 (0.042)	0.044 (0.042)	-0.130*** (0.036)	-0.046 (0.030)	-0.041 (0.030)
Female	1.111** (0.522)	1.113** (0.522)	1.762* (0.981)	0.383 (1.224)	1.279* (0.704)
Age	0.644 (1.700)	0.476 (1.699)	-3.904 (4.285)	3.269 (2.205)	-7.047* (4.051)
Education	3.928 (2.781)	3.873 (2.779)	13.325 (15.411)	5.128 (17.326)	1.671 (2.866)
Social class	1.384*** (0.338)	1.381*** (0.336)	1.798* (1.045)	1.198*** (0.445)	2.035*** (0.655)
Economic retrospection	2.495*** (0.120)	2.486*** (0.120)	2.470*** (0.260)	2.572*** (0.178)	2.557*** (0.245)
Political interest	1.098*** (0.415)	1.121*** (0.415)	0.953 (0.600)	1.313* (0.755)	1.262 (0.941)
Germany	-0.598*** (0.104)	-0.596*** (0.104)			
Italy	-0.104 (0.101)	-0.108 (0.101)			
/cut1	-2.914*** (0.255)	-2.581*** (0.270)	-3.732*** (0.332)	-3.164*** (0.289)	-2.255*** (0.299)
/cut2	-0.181 (0.244)	0.156 (0.260)	-1.178*** (0.315)	-0.211 (0.247)	0.467 (0.286)
/cut3	1.867*** (0.247)	2.205*** (0.263)	1.025*** (0.316)	1.910*** (0.256)	2.331*** (0.294)
Observations	19,048	19,048	5,838	6,786	6,424

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

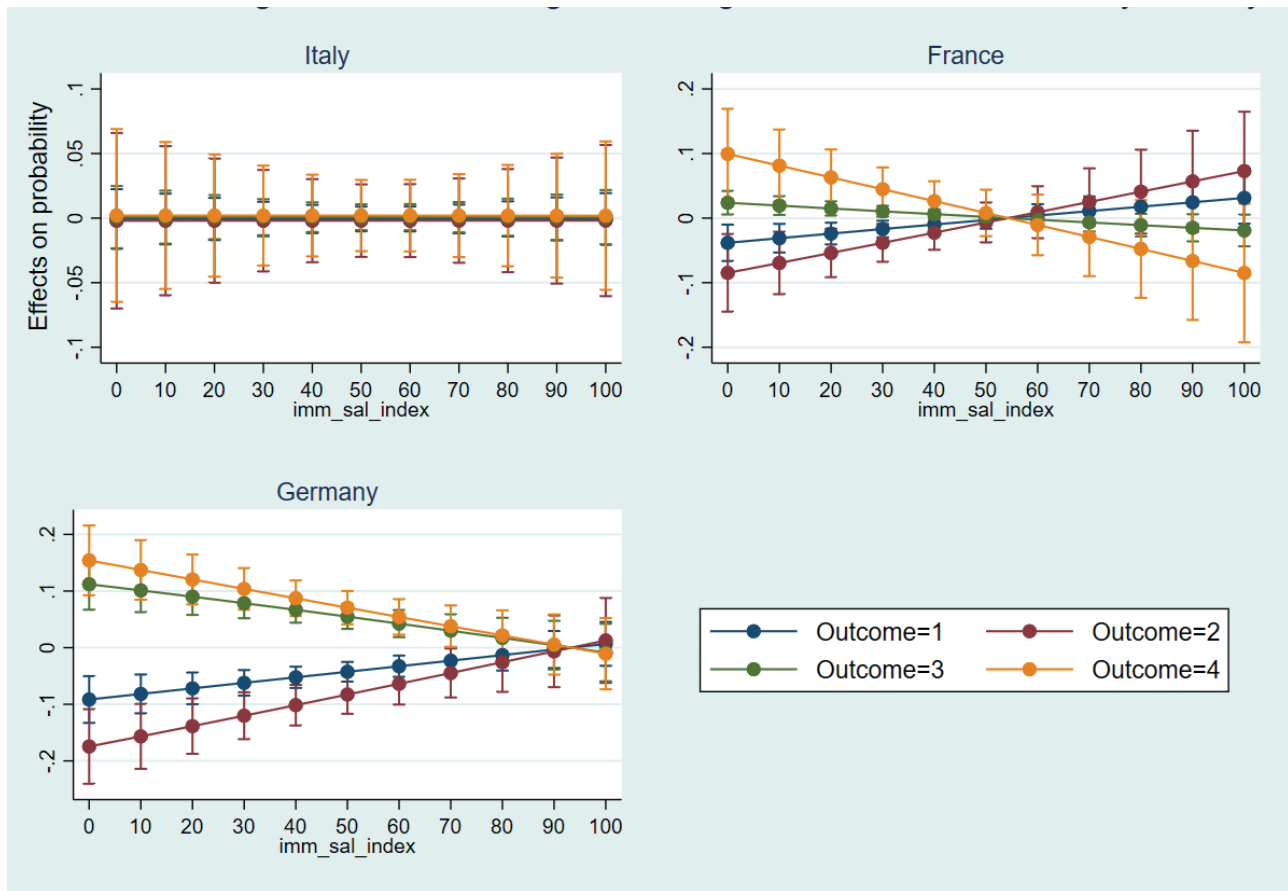


Figure 3. Marginal Effects – Immigration Congruence x Salience Index by Country. Note: Average marginal effects of Issue Congruence by Salience Indices with 95% Cis. Higher values of SWD indicate greater satisfaction with democracy (recoded scale).

with Hypothesis 4. The variation in effects across countries offers evidence in support of Hypothesis 3, which expects contextual variation in the congruence-SWD relationship due to the different national political systems and representational dynamics.

These cross-national variations are further illustrated in Figures 3–5, which display the marginal effects of issue-specific congruence at varying levels of salience index, separately for immigration, environment, and economy.

Figure 3 shows the interaction between immigration congruence and immigration salience index. In Germany, where the effect of immigration congruence on satisfaction with democracy is the strongest (Model 5), the figure reveals a clear negative interaction: the positive effect of congruence declines significantly as salience index increases. In France, the effect is weaker but still positive and stable across salience levels, in line with the moderate significance found in Model 4. In Italy, the curve is flat, confirming the lack of any substantial

relationship between immigration congruence and SWD (Model 3).

Figure 4 examines environmental congruence. Here, Italy stands out: the marginal effect of congruence is positive and stable across the salience range, confirming that the environment is the only issue where congruence significantly predicts satisfaction with democracy (Model 3). In France, the effect is again modestly positive and slightly decreasing as salience increases, suggesting a similar but weaker pattern. In Germany, no consistent relationship emerges, echoing the non-significant coefficients in the country-specific model (Model 5).

Figure 5 reports the results for economic congruence. The most pronounced effect is again in Germany, where the positive association between congruence and SWD decreases significantly with increasing salience index, mirroring the pattern found for immigration. In Italy and France, the marginal effects remain flat, consistent with the lack of significance found in the respective models.

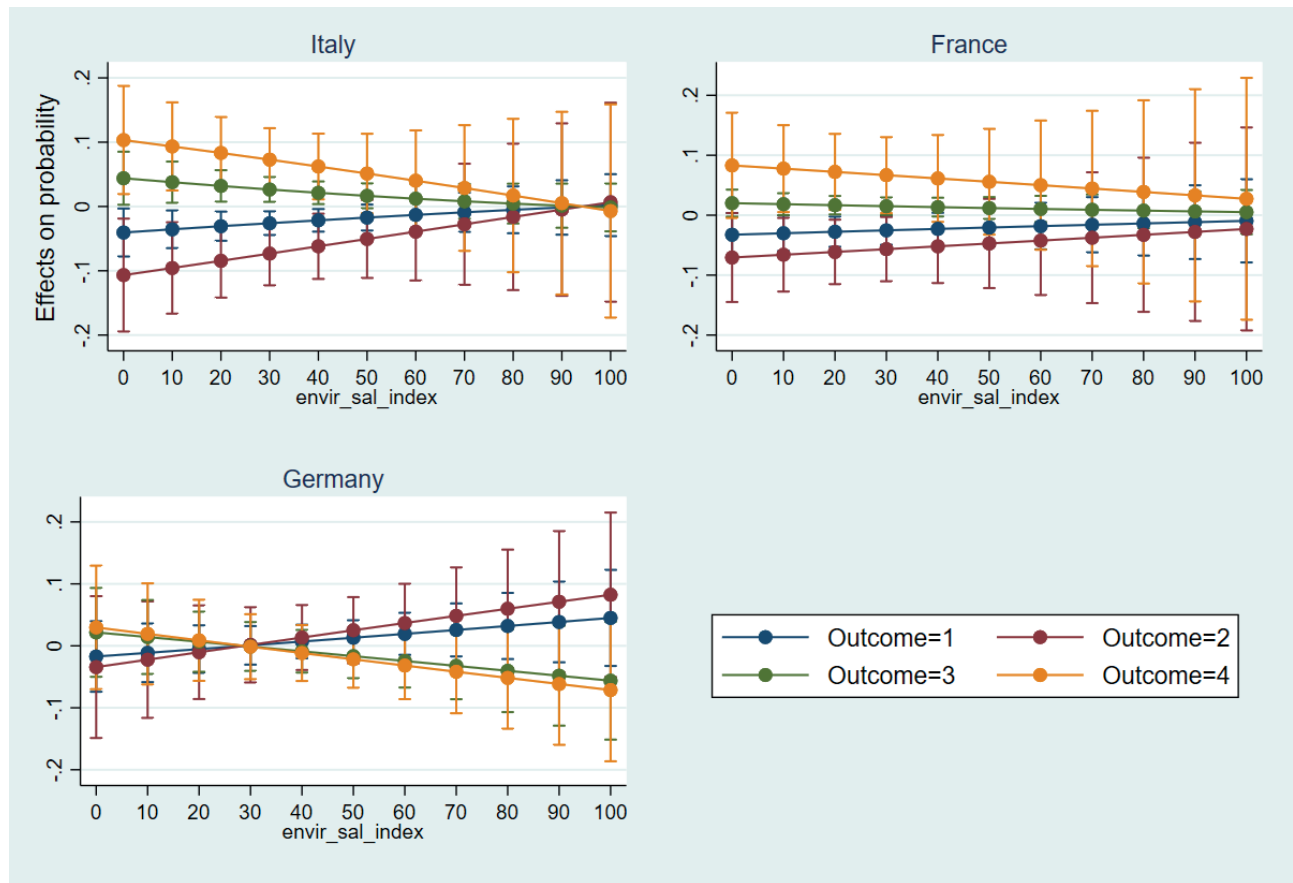


Figure 4. Marginal Effects – Environment Congruence x Salience Index by Country. Note: Average marginal effects of Issue Congruence by Salience Indices with 95% CIs. Higher values of SWD indicate greater satisfaction with democracy (recoded scale).

DISCUSSION

The findings support the general expectation of Hypothesis 1: higher levels of issue congruence between citizens and political parties are associated with greater satisfaction with democracy (SWD). This is consistent with proximity-based models of political evaluation, whereby voters feel better represented when parties adopt positions closer to their own preferences (Downs, 1957). However, the data clearly show that this relationship is not uniform. It varies across policy domains (H2), national contexts (H3), and depending on the salience of issues and citizen's media exposure (H4). To explore these variations more precisely, the discussion is organized around each policy issue, followed by comparative reflections on single countries.

Immigration

Immigration congruence emerges as the most robust and symbolically charged predictor of SWD, especially

in Germany and France. In line with H2 and previous research on identity-driven issues (Colomer & Beale, 2020), this confirms that immigration is not just about policy positions, but about identity, visibility, and symbolic alignment. In Germany, the effect of immigration congruence is particularly strong, yet – as shown in Figure 3 – it significantly declines at higher levels of salience. This supports Hypothesis 4, suggesting that when the issue becomes highly salient, congruence may no longer suffice to generate satisfaction. Instead, salience appears to sharpen expectations and evaluative standards, thereby exposing even aligned citizens to doubt, disillusionment, or perception of policy inefficacy (Lenz, 2009; Ciuk & Yost, 2016).

This paradox – where the strongest congruence effect also shows the sharpest negative interaction – confirms findings on the polarizing potential of salience in fragmented media environments (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2009; Soroka & Wlezien, 2010). In France, immigration congruence also has a positive effect on SWD,

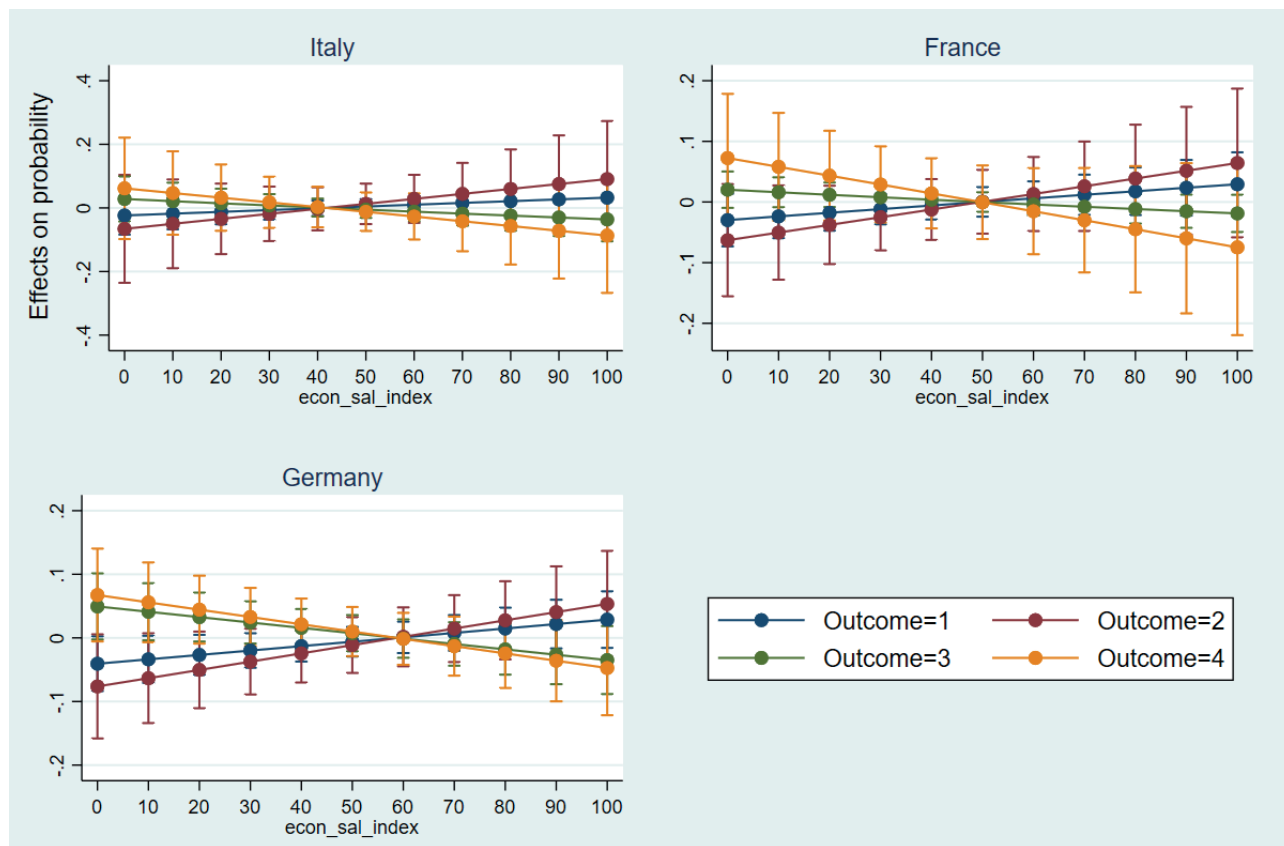


Figure 5. Marginal Effects – Economy Congruence x Salience Index by Country. Note: Average marginal effects of Issue Congruence by Salience Indices with 95% CIs. Higher values of SWD indicate greater satisfaction with democracy (recoded scale).

though it is more modest and stable across salience levels, indicating a different relationship between party competition and media dynamics. In Italy, by contrast, immigration congruence has no observable impact on SWD, and the effect remains flat regardless of the interaction with salience index – suggesting either lower perceived party differentiation or a more diffuse public opinion structure on this issue (Hallin & Mancini, 2017).

Environment

Environmental congruence reveals a different picture. As seen in Figure 4, Italy stands out as the only country where environmental congruence significantly increases SWD. This finding is notable and aligns with the idea that ecological issues³, while not always highly

salient, can carry strong normative weight and symbolic value (Halla et al., 2013). In Italy, where partisan divides have long been volatile and trust in institutions relatively low, environmental congruence may offer an alternative channel for political resonance that transcends traditional party structures. It is important to clarify that environmental congruence does not indicate environmentalism per se, but rather the perceived alignment between citizens and parties on environmental priorities. Disaggregated results (see Appendix 1.C) show that the Lega exhibits the highest level of environmental congruence among Italian parties. With a score of 7.7 on the environmental issue (Appendix 2), the party supports economic growth even at the expense of environmental protection, a position that appears to align closely with the preferences of a significant share of the electorate. This finding is particularly notable given that the Lega also secured the highest vote share in the 2019 European elections (34%). This suggests that environmental con-

³ This analysis relies on data from the 2019 European Parliament elections, during which environmental issues gained substantial visibility—largely due to transnational mobilizations such as *Fridays for Future* in 2018. Concern for climate change has only intensified since: Eurobarometer data (EB 99.3) show that 77% of EU citizens consider climate

change a very serious problem, while Istat data from 2024 indicate that 58.1% of Italians express strong concern.

gruence may contribute not only to citizens' democratic satisfaction, but potentially also to electoral outcomes, especially when parties manage to align with public preferences on symbolically charged issues.

In France, environmental congruence has a positive but weaker effect on SWD, which declines slightly as salience increases. This pattern again reflects the idea that salience does not uniformly reinforce representation effects. In Germany, where the Green Party has long been integrated into the party system and environmental policy is broadly mainstreamed, no significant effect is observed. This may reflect a loss of representational distinctiveness: when all major parties endorse similar ecological positions, environmental congruence may no longer serve as a clear basis for party-voter alignment.

Economy

While economic issues are typically viewed as central to political evaluations – due to their valence nature and citizens' broad agreement on goals such as growth or employment (Abney et al., 2011; Cox & Béland, 2012) – our findings suggest that these shared priorities do not necessarily translate into higher satisfaction when the representational link lacks credibility or programmatic clarity. As shown in Figure 5, the economy only matters in Germany, where congruence on this issue is associated with SWD – but this effect diminishes with increasing salience, in line with H4 and considering the different characteristics of the political-media systems in the different countries, as discussed above. In Italy and France, economic congruence shows no significant impact, and marginal effects remain flat. This may help explain why economic congruence only yields an effect in Germany, where the stability of the party system and the structured competition around economic competence may allow congruence to retain evaluative meaning. By contrast, in Italy and France, where trust in parties is lower and economic policymaking is often perceived as technocratic or externally constrained (Hobolt et al., 2021), congruence on economic positions may appear less politically meaningful. Here, retrospective or outcome-based evaluations may outweigh programmatic alignment (van der Brug et al., 2007; Evrenk, 2018). This means that citizens may judge parties not on whether they share their economic preferences, but on whether they deliver tangible outcomes. In this light, congruence may appear politically neutral if it is not accompanied by visible policy success. Moreover, the technical complexity and elite-driven nature of economic policymaking may reduce the symbolic value of congruence in favour of output-based accountability (Kitschelt, 2000; Thomassen, 2005).

This contrasts with positional issues like immigration or transnational concerns like the environment, where congruence may be perceived as recognition, moral alignment, or affirmation of voice in the political process (Hutter & Kriesi, 2022; Simon, 2024). These issues are more likely to trigger symbolic responses, intensify identity cues, and influence perceived satisfaction beyond programmatic terms. The findings thus lend support to critiques of economic determinism in political behaviour (Inglehart & Norris, 2019) and highlight the importance of symbolic and identity-based dimensions of political representation (Hobolt et al., 2021).

Salience, media exposure and the interpretation of H4

The moderating role of salience, as posited in Hypothesis 4, is only partially confirmed. While Germany provides clear evidence that high salience reduces the positive effect of congruence – particularly on contested issues such as immigration and the economy – this pattern does not emerge in Italy or France. This suggests that salience does not operate uniformly across contexts, but rather interacts with specific features of national media systems, political cultures, and patterns of party competition. For instance, in Italy, general media exposure has a significant and negative association with SWD, independently of specific issues⁴. This may reflect enduring characteristics of the Italian media environment, such as the polarized pluralist model (Hallin & Mancini, 2017), where greater exposure may reinforce political cynicism or disengagement.

While salience can theoretically make both agreement and disagreement more visible, our findings indicate that under conditions of polarized discourse and heightened media exposure, it more often acts as a catalyst for critical evaluation. Even when party positions align with citizen preferences, high salience may sharpen evaluative standards and draw attention to discrepancies between political discourse and perceived outcomes (Lenz, 2009; Bartels, 1993; Neuman & Guggenheim, 2011). In this sense, salience amplifies not only awareness of representation, but also sensitivity to inconsistency, ambiguity, or perceived insincerity, particularly when mediated by intense media exposure (Luebke & Engle-

⁴ In this regard, it is worth noting that the model presented in Appendix 1A – which uses pooled congruence variables – shows a significantly positive coefficient for media exposure on SWD. However, this result should not be interpreted substantively: the variable used in the model includes \hat{y} predictions and is intended solely as a baseline control specification. The coefficient should be treated similarly to a \hat{y} -hat socio-demographic covariate (Stecker & Tausendpfund, 2016), and not as a test of the theoretical assumptions concerning salience index effects.

mann, 2022).

CONCLUSIONS

This study contributes to the understanding of democratic satisfaction by examining how issue-specific party-citizen congruence interacts with party salience and citizens' media exposure across different national contexts. The findings indicate that congruence matters, but its effects are not uniform. Not all issues weigh equally in citizens' evaluations: symbolically charged and identity-related domains, such as immigration and the environment, have a stronger impact on SWD than economic congruence.

This suggests that citizens respond more to alignment on issues reflecting values, identity, or moral priorities, rather than on broadly shared economic goals (Colomer & Beale, 2020; Hobolt et al., 2021). In this light, SWD is not merely a reaction to policy agreement, but a judgement shaped by issue salience, perceived meaning, and political recognition.

The effect of congruence also varies by national context. In Germany, a stable party system and clearer programmatic competition on economic issues may explain why congruence has stronger effects – particularly when salience remains moderate. In Italy and France, by contrast, alignment appears less relevant, particularly on valence issues like the economy – possibly reflecting a broader disconnection between citizens and political institutions that weakens the evaluative weight of policy congruence. Environmental congruence is politically meaningful only in Italy, where ecological concerns are less structured by partisan identities and often framed in moral or territorial terms (Carrieri & Morini, 2022). This may render them accessible across ideological lines. In a context of persistent distrust, alignment on environmental issues may serve as an alternative evaluative lens, signalling attentiveness to citizen priorities in a domain often perceived as neglected or symbolically charged (Halla et al., 2013).

The findings also partially support Hypothesis 4, which anticipated a negative moderating effect of salience – that is, high salience and media exposure reduce the positive effect of congruence. In Germany, this is evident: higher salience diminishes the impact of congruence, especially on immigration and economic issues. Increased visibility appears to raise expectations and intensify scrutiny, exposing gaps between party rhetoric and perceived outcomes (Lenz, 2009; Bartels, 1993; Neuman & Guggenheim, 2011). This pattern does not emerge in France or Italy, suggesting that the impact

of salience is mediated by national media systems and political discourse. Rather than amplifying clarity, salience often acts as a filter, shaping how citizens interpret alignment – sometimes reinforcing dissatisfaction when expectations are unmet (Luebke & Englemann, 2022).

Taken together, these findings reinforce the importance of issue-specific dynamics and national contexts in shaping how citizens evaluate democratic performance. They also suggest that congruence effects are not simply additive: the meaning and impact of party-citizen alignment depend on how salient an issue is and how that salience is mediated by both party emphasis and media exposure. Future research should extend this analysis across more countries and time points while incorporating a wider range of issues and potentially including experimental designs to test causality. By disentangling the role of issue congruence and salience interactions, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of what drives satisfaction with democracy and how citizens perceive representation in contemporary democracies.

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Rainbow ballots: introducing the Italian LGBTIQ+ electoral survey 2024

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Abstract. The development of an empirics-based political science agenda on the electoral dimension of LGBTIQ+ citizens has been traditionally hindered by the widespread lack of individual-level data related to the sensitivity of their identity, including in Italy. In this paper, we contribute to the literature by first presenting a novel survey, providing public opinion data on the political participation, issue attitudes, and vote choice of a large number of Italian LGBTIQ+ citizens. We detail the rationale and challenges related to our research, leading to our strategic approach to the development of a self-selected sample based on an original sampling technique. On this basis, in an area of public debate often dominated by clichés rather than scientific evidence, we introduce first empirics on Italian LGBTIQ+ respondents. In line with existing studies from other Western national contexts, our LGBTIQ+ sample is active in civil society and politics – albeit not “activist” –, consistently votes in elections, and is markedly left-wing in values, issue attitudes, and vote choice. We discuss the scientific and societal contributions of our paper in detail.

Keywords: survey data, LGBTIQ+ politics, issue attitudes, voting behaviour, political participation, Italy.

1. INTRODUCTION

The political science subfield of LGBTIQ+ politics, long marginalised within the discipline, has recently been expanding, especially across North American and Western European countries (Mucciaroni, 2011; Paternotte, 2018; Magni, 2020; Turnbull-Dugarte, 2020; Prearo & Trastulli, 2024). We mention here two broad reasons amongst the main ones as to why the expansion of a subdiscipline on LGBTIQ+ politics is fundamental and should be further encouraged. The first and most important one is the progressive inclusion towards the consideration of political LGBTIQ+ topics, LGBTIQ+ citizens, and even LGBTIQ+ scholars – who are often most, albeit not all, of the researchers on these matters – as equally worthy objects and authors of scientific inquiry within the discipline (Novkov & Barclay, 2010). The second reason is substantive in nature, and should be of interest to all political scientists and especially electoral scholars. Emerging comparative evidence shows that the LGBTIQ+ population – which is numerically sizeable across

domestic Western societies (e.g., IPSOS, 2024) – thinks politically, participates, and votes differently (Hertzog, 1996; Turnbull-Dugarte, 2020; Turnbull-Dugarte & Townsley, 2020; Hunklinger & Ferch, 2020; Jones, 2021; Grahm, 2024; Prearo et al., 2024; Chan & Magni, 2025); LGBTIQ+ issues have become increasingly politicised by élite-level actors, such as parties and political leaders, and citizens alike (Paternotte, 2018; Abou-Chadi et al., 2021); and causal evidence shows how such politicisation is effective in making citizens at large varying – often, less – supportive of LGBTIQ+ rights, especially when instrumental (Turnbull-Dugarte & López Ortega, 2024). Already these reasons contribute, in our view, to making the scientific and empirics-based investigation of LGBTIQ+ citizens and their political dimension important.

A particular challenge specifically for electoral behaviour studies within this subdiscipline is the widespread lack of individual-level data related to LGBTIQ+ citizens. Gathering information on citizens' gender identity and sexual orientation comes with both methodological and practical difficulties, so much so that even census-wise this information is only routinely collected in a few countries, such as England and Wales since 2021 (Guyan, 2022). In other words, the social stigmatisation of LGBTIQ+ citizens and sensitivity of LGBTIQ+ identity makes citizens from gender and sexual minorities a so-called 'hard-to-reach' population (Khouri, 2020), frequently leaving researchers interested in such subpopulations without sampling frames or data altogether. In turn, the lack of empirical data on LGBTIQ+ citizens' political attitudes, priorities, voting behaviour, and broader patterns of participation and mobilisation risk hindering an evidence-based equalising policy action.

In this paper, we present the first survey conducted to specifically gather political information related to LGBTIQ+ citizens in Italy. This effort follows in the footsteps of analogous and innovative projects, recently conducted by colleagues across Western European institutions in countries such as Austria and Germany (Hunklinger & Ferch, 2020; Hunklinger & Kleer, 2024). As such, this paper will have the goal of illustrating the research rationale, design characteristics and methodological choices, and first descriptive results related to our survey investigation. This project allowed for the collection of precious data concerning a socially marginalised but numerically sizeable subpopulation of our country, whose political characteristics are often understood in anecdotal and stereotypical ways rather than through actual evidence – partly because of its very lack. As such, this effort is not only important for more effective strategies to target this subpopulation by policy-makers and political parties, but also for the increased social – and,

therefore, also scientific – inclusion of LGBTIQ+ citizens, including specifically in Italian political science.

The paper is structured as follows: the next section describes the survey as a research project, devoting particular attention to its design and methodological features. The following section briefly illustrates descriptive evidence on the final sample, especially focussing on LGBTIQ+ identity and other sociodemographic characteristics. Subsequently, we first provide large-N descriptive evidence on the attitudes, political participation, and voting behaviour of Italian LGBTIQ+ citizens. Concluding remarks follow.

2. THE ITALIAN LGBTIQ+ ELECTORAL SURVEY

The sensitivity of LGBTIQ+ identity and the lack of an Italian census tradition in gathering data on citizens' gender and sexual minority status meant that, similarly to comparable Western European cases (Hunklinger & Ferch, 2020; Hunklinger & Kleer, 2024), the effort of conducting a survey investigation was further complicated by the lack of a sampling frame regarding the Italian LGBTIQ+ population. Therefore, we had to rely on a self-selected sample for our survey (Groves et al., 2009). This comes with an obvious, but profound consequence, which we should clearly acknowledge from the outset: by design, our data cannot be representative of the entire Italian LGBTIQ+ population,¹ but only of its respondents.

In this scenario, we opted for an original survey distribution and sampling strategy. We independently designed the survey on Qualtrics and distributed it across multiple channels with a twofold goal: maximising the outreach to Italian LGBTIQ+ citizens and, as best as possible, compensating for the lack of a sampling frame by seeking to reach multiple profiles of LGBTIQ+ respondents and not only those that could have been more prone to responding to a political and electoral survey (i.e., activists in associations or politics). As LGBTIQ+ respondents who are also LGBTIQ+ activists may share a broad commonality of political positions, which however may not necessarily represent the entire spectrum of political views amongst LGBTIQ+ citizens (e.g., Hunklinger & Ajanović, 2022; Sibley, 2024), it was important for our survey investigation to also go beyond this subset of respondents. To achieve this differentiation in our sample, we hence distributed our survey through not only some of the largest LGBTIQ+ associations in

¹ Importantly, this population is inherently and ultimately unknown, because there may well be a sizeable portion of Italian LGBTIQ+ citizens who are not out.

Italy (e.g., Arcigay), but also through internet advertising managed by a hired firm (including search engine ads on Google, YouTube, and websites spaces), articles and advertisements in print newspapers, social media posts, and snowballing in personal networks. The proportion of valid responses to our survey originating from every distribution channel is reported in Table 1, where another important information is also reported: of 2604 respondents, more than half (1438, 55.2%) reported not being active or participating in the activities of LGBTIQ+ associations, and only 24.9% (649) defined themselves as LGBTIQ+ activists.

Our survey was in the field immediately after the 2024 European Parliament (EP) election, held between 6-9 June 2024 across European Union (EU) member states and specifically on 8 and 9 June in Italy. As such, similarly to established public opinion studies, it is a post-electoral survey, with the advantages in terms of data quality and reliability brought about by the heightened salience of politics during an electoral event, which primes and mobilises citizens' political views, therefore enhancing the survey's ability to authentically capture them (e.g., Hernández et al., 2021). In line with comparable studies,² our survey was online for 5 weeks, between 10 June 2024 and 15 July 2024. Upon fieldwork completion, significant data cleaning and management of the 3888 responses originally received were required. First, the vast majority of problematic responses (1066) were incomplete ones, which we dropped. Subsequently, based on prior estimates of the time required for survey completion, we also excluded an additional number of 'speed-runners', whilst also checking for potential response sets (overall, 216 additional responses). Lastly, we eliminated a few remaining responses containing nonsensical or not respectful information with regard to our questions on gender identity and sexual orientation (2), to obtain our final sample of 2604 valid responses.

Our survey was made up of an introductory section, two screening questions, and seven substantive modules. In the introductory section, we first gave a general introduction to our survey investigation and research project, providing respondents with our contact details. On two separate pages, we subsequently provided respondents with detailed information on, first, the research purposes and sensitive aspects related to the participation in our survey and, second, data treatment in line with Article 13 of the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and university policy. In order to proceed, potential respondents had to then declare that they were

Table 1. Information on LGBTIQ+ sample composition.

Distribution channel	% of sample (N=2604)
Press and media advertisement	20.3
LGBTIQ+ associations	18.7
Social media posts	45.5
Personal networks	15.5
Participate in LGBTIQ+ associations' activities	44.8
LGBTIQ+ activists	24.9

informed by us on both such aspects and, consequently, happy to go ahead with the survey. With no other means at our disposal, we then employed screening questions in order to only allow people who were both LGBTIQ+ and of voting age (in Italy, 18 and older) to answer our survey. We hence filtered out all those respondents who did not declare being LGBTIQ+ and reported an age younger than 18 from our survey, preventing them from answering the questionnaire.

Respondents who made it through all such steps were eligible to take our survey and, hence, administered its seven substantive modules. The first module was a warm-up opening section on specific sociodemographic information that, however, already included important questions on gender identity and sexual orientation for our purposes. Following and elaborating on best practices in the field (e.g., Medeiros et al., 2019; Herman, 2014; Albaugh et al., 2024; IPSOS, 2024), we asked multiple questions to capture the gender identity of respondents. Indeed, we both asked about sex assigned at birth (female/male response options) and sex reported on IDs, which in Italy can only be male or female. In addition to a subsequent gender identity question (*"How would you currently describe yourself?"*) with several response options (woman, man, trans woman, trans man, trans non-binary, non-binary/genderfluid, and "other" with possibility for an open response), this further allowed us to distinguish between cisgender and transgender/non-binary respondents that may not otherwise have been captured solely based on the gender identity information. Furthermore, we asked respondents about their sexual orientation, providing multiple response options such as heterosexual (a possible response option for some trans/non-binary respondents), gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, fluid, and including the possibility of both providing an open response or not defining one's sexual orientation. Separately, we also asked whether respondents are intersexual, providing a brief definition of this more complex concept to enhance the question's clarity (*"Some people are born with sexual char-*

² For instance, see the methodological information on the Austrian and German LGBTIQ+ Election Studies project: <https://www.uni-giessen.de/en/faculties/f03/departments/dps/research/areas/germany/lgbtiq>.

acteristics (such as genitalia and/or some chromosomal combinations) that do not correspond strictly to the male or female categories, or correspond to both simultaneously. This condition is known as *intersex*"). The first module ended with questions on respondents' region and urban/rural context of residence.

In the following modules, we followed practices and indications emerging from both established electoral (e.g., the Italian National Election Study, Itanes: Vezzoni et al., 2023; and Issue Competition Comparative Project, ICCP: De Sio et al., 2019) and sociological surveys (e.g., EU FRA, 2020; Gusmeroli & Trappolin, 2023). The second module asked respondents about their relationship with politics and democracy, with questions tapping into classical concepts of public opinion research such as political interest, vertical and horizontal trust, democratic attitudes, mobilisation within political and non-political associations and organisations, and LGBTIQ+ activism.

In the third module, we asked LGBTIQ+ respondents about their opinions on LGBTIQ+ political issues that have been salient in Italian public debates in recent years. Covered issues include the evolution of discrimination towards LGBTIQ+ people and underlying reasons, same-sex marriage (see, e.g., Flores, 2015) and adoptions, medically assisted procreation, surrogacy, and trans/non-binary issues such as specific discrimination, simplified administrative procedures to change IDs, and the so-called "*carriera alias*" – the possibility to use a different name for administrative and registry purposes in schools and universities. As per above, more complex concepts such as medically assisted procreation and surrogacy were briefly and clearly explained to respondents in the questions. Note that, because of the generally more favourable public opinion on specific issues when the beneficiaries are heterosexual couples (Turnbull-Dugarte, 2024), questions on such topics also include response options that differentiate between hetero and same-sex couples or other recipients of said measures (e.g., on medically assisted procreation: "*Only heterosexual couples should have access to this practice*" versus "*Single women, but not lesbian couples, should also have access to this practice*" versus "*Single women and lesbian couples should also have access to this practice*"; on surrogacy: "*Yes, in all cases*" versus "*Yes, but only for heterosexual couples*").

The fourth module builds on sociological surveys to ask our respondents about experiences related to their LGBTIQ+ identity, which may also be powerful predictors of political and electoral behaviour. This module includes questions about trans/non-binary people's access to dedicated services and their underlying rea-

sons, outness in different social settings, as well as different types of violence, discrimination, and contexts in which one fears being out.

The fifth and sixth modules are more canonical within electoral surveys. They respectively tackle, on the one hand, further economic and political issues, including respondents' opinions on the Italian Parliament's rejection in 2021 of the legislative proposal on disability and LGBTIQ+-motivated hate crime known as "*DDL Zan*", most important issues, as well as attitudes on immigration and climate change; and, on the other hand, typical variables of political participation and public opinion research such as left-right self-placement, party identification, leader appreciation, government evaluation, vote recall and abstention, negative voting, and descriptive representation. Finally, the concluding module capped off the survey with final sociodemographic questions on respondents' marital and family status, level of education, religiousness, ethnicity, occupation, class self-identification, and economic well-being.

3. OUR ITALIAN LGBTIQ+ SAMPLE

Table 2 presents information about fundamental characteristics of our sample of Italian LGBTIQ+ respondents on their gender and sexual minority status, as well as on other important sociodemographics. In terms of gender identity, cisgender respondents make up the vast majority of our sample, with a prevalence of cis men (49.7%) over cisgender women (32%). Trans and non-binary respondents constitute a minority, although sizeable, of our LGBTIQ+ sample (13.8%) – especially amongst the youngest (24.4% of 18-to-29-year-olds, compared to 12% in the 30-44 cohort; 9.1% in the 45-54 cohort; and 9.2% of over-55s).³ Cautiously, we reckon this may be interpreted as signalling a potentially diminished reticence in coming out for younger trans and non-binary Italian citizens, compared to older generations.

The information on sexual orientation reported in Table 2 is also interesting. Namely, gays are by far the largest sexual-orientation subgroup in our sample of Italian LGBTIQ+ citizens, accounting for almost one in two respondents (45.3%). Bisexuals/pansexuals and lesbians follow from a distance (respectively, 23.4% and 19.2%), whilst the more inclusive outlook from which we devel-

³ Specifically, we provided trans and non-binary respondents with four distinct response options: non-binary/genderfluid (7.7%), trans/non-binary (2.3%), trans/non-binary men (1.5%), and trans/non-binary women (2.3%).

Table 2. Respondents' gender identity, sexual orientation, and other sociodemographic characteristics.

Gender and sexual minority status	% of sample (N=2604)
Cis men	49.7
Cis women	32
Trans and non-binary	13.8
Other gender identity	3.1
Heterosexual	1.5
Gay	45.3
Lesbian	19.2
Bisexual/Pansexual	23.4
Asexual	2.5
Fluid	1.5
Other sexual orientation	2.9
Refuse to define sexual orientation	3
Other sociodemographic characteristics	
Residing in the North of Italy	63.9
Residing in the Centre of Italy	18.2
Residing in the South of Italy	12.8
Residing abroad	5
Residing in urban contexts	82.4
Residing in rural contexts	17.6
18-29	30.7
30-44	41.7
45-54	15.1
>55	12.5
Primary education (up to middle-school diploma)	2.2
Secondary education (high-school diploma or equivalent)	23.7
Tertiary education (three-year university degree and above)	74.1
Secular (agnostic/atheist)	72.2
Catholic	13.3
Practising catholic (attends church at least once a week)	2.9
Non-practising catholic	10.2
Employed	77.9
Not in employment	22.1
Ethnic minority	3.3
Ethnic majority	95.8
Lower classes	30.7
Middle class	52.1
Higher classes	17.8

oped our survey compared to traditional political and electoral surveys – as well as our target population – allowed for reaching sizeable subgroups of respondents from other sexual minorities (7.5% pansexuals, 2.5% asexuals, 1.5% fluid, etc.). Concerning the main sexual orientation subgroups, it is noteworthy that the propor-

tion of 'gay' respondents – perhaps an older 'umbrella term' – linearly increases in older cohorts (28.8% in the 18-29 cohort; 47.5% in the 30-44 cohort; 59.4% in the 45-54 cohort; and 61.9% in the over-55 cohort), whilst the opposite applies to the proportion of 'bisexual/pansexual' respondents, largest amongst youngest respondents (38.5% in the 18-29 cohort; 19.9% in the 30-44 cohort; 12.2% in the 45-54 cohort; and 11.7% in the over-55 cohort).⁴ Naturally, the heterosexual subgroup – by definition confined to trans and non-binary respondents only – constitutes a much tinier portion of our sample here compared to usual heteronormative contexts (1.5%).

The data on gender and sexual minorities from our LGBTIQ+ sample already allows for two initial but important considerations. First, these internal proportions and particularly the predominance of gay men are in line with existing evidence, particularly from the Austrian and German LGBTIQ* Election Studies project. Second, the fact that cis men and gays constitute the relative majority of our sample should be a further indication of the fact that, ultimately, this selection of respondents is not representative of our target and unknown Italian LGBTIQ+ population, but rather of those LGBTIQ+ citizens that we reached who chose to come out to us on this occasion in responding to our survey. That these male, cisgender, and gay subgroups were prevalent reflects known patterns of coming out within the broader LGBTIQ+ community, which in turn are linked to the internal power imbalances between different gender and sexual subgroups (male over female, cis over trans, etc.). It also signals the greater difficulty of reaching groups or subgroups that are further marginalised within the LGBTIQ+ population itself, whose limited visibility and structural vulnerabilities tend to reduce their likelihood of participating in such surveys or of being reached by them in the first place.

Beyond gender and sexual minority status, Table 2 provides additional interesting information on the sociodemographics of our LGBTIQ+ sample. First, looking at the traditional geopolitical areas of Italy, the vast majority of our LGBTIQ+ respondents – almost two out of three (63.9%) – resides in the North of Italy. Much fewer people live in the Centre (18.2%) or, even less, the South (12%) of Italy, whilst we were also able to reach a sizeable portion of Italian LGBTIQ+ respondents living abroad (5%).⁵ These patterns of geographical distribu-

⁴ Across cohorts, 'lesbian' respondents in our Italian LGBTIQ+ sample are 16% (18-29), 22% (30-44), 19.3% (45-54), and 17.5% (over-55s).

⁵ North: Emilia-Romagna, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Liguria, Lombardia, Piemonte, Trentino-Alto Adige, Veneto, Valle d'Aosta. Centre: Lazio, Marche, Toscana, Umbria. South: Abruzzo, Basilicata, Calabria, Campania, Molise, Puglia, Sardegna, Sicilia.

tion seem to reflect well-known political, social, and cultural characteristics of the different areas of Italy, with the generally more socially liberal Northern areas of the country – particularly, Lombardia driven by the large hub of Milano (23%) – more frequently represented than the Centre – although with several respondents from regions with big cities such as Lazio (9.4%) and Toscana (6.5%) – and, especially, the South of Italy. This idea is complemented by looking at the urban versus rural distribution of our LGBTIQ+ respondents, corresponding to a well-known division in the literature between, respectively, more or less LGBTIQ+-friendly and socially liberal settings (e.g., Ayoub & Kollman, 2021; Aldrich, 2004; Gray, 2009). Indeed, 82.4% of our LGBTIQ+ respondents live in urban contexts such as cities and small-to-medium towns whilst only 17.6% of them live in villages and in the countryside.

Age-wise, our LGBTIQ+ sample is mostly made up of young adults, with the largest age classes being 30-44 (41.7%) and 18-29 (30.7%). Older age groups, namely 45-54 (15.1%) and over-55s (12.5%), are comparatively less represented in our sample. This configuration of respondents at different ages reflects both the bias introduced by the computer-assisted web interview (CAWI) surveying technique that we adopted, usually mitigated by applying survey weights when a sampling frame is available; and the generational dynamics underpinning the outness of LGBTIQ+ citizens, since coming out has become much more common for LGBTIQ+ citizens socialised in more recent years (Dunlap, 2016). Notwithstanding these observations, this data seems overall in line with LGBTIQ+ subsamples from comparable general-population survey investigations in Italy – which seem slightly younger at first sight (e.g., Prearo et al., 2024, p. 7).

Finally, the last sociodemographic descriptives of Table 2 depict an LGBTIQ+ subsample made up of mostly higher-educated (74.1%), secular (72.2%) – although with a sizeable Catholic minority, mostly non-practising (10.2%) –, employed (77.9%), and ethnic-majority respondents (95.8%), mainly from the middle (52.1%) and lower classes (30.7%). Again, this large subgroup of stigmatised gender and sexual minorities should not be seen as a monolithic bloc, but rather as very differentiated and internally reflecting additional social divisions and imbalances of power, leaving smaller minorities of citizens experiencing intersectionality – e.g., our LGBTIQ+ respondents from an ethnic minority (3.3%) – in a position of multiple disadvantage and heightened vulnerability.

4. THE POLITICAL PREFERENCES OF LGBTIQ+ ITALIAN CITIZENS

What do Italian LGBTIQ+ citizens look like politically? Here, we first provide large-N evidence on the politics of Italians from gender and sexual minorities. Before delving into their attitudes and voting behaviour, it is useful to take a preliminary step by looking at their predisposition to political mobilisation.

Are Italian LGBTIQ+ citizens responding to our survey an active subpopulation in civil society and politics? Table 3 seems to suggest so: when looking at participation in the activities of associations and organisations including political parties, trade unions, collectives, LGBTIQ+ associations, NGOs, youth organisations, environmental associations, religious movements, consumers' associations, cultural and arts centres, sports clubs, and volunteering, one in two of our LGBTIQ+ respondents report being involved in activities within one of such contexts. The other half of our sample is almost equally split between those that are active in two (22.9%) or three (27.1%) of these contexts.

Is this civic engagement specifically within LGBTIQ+ associations and/or political in nature? From the data in Table 3, the answer to this twofold question seems positive with regard to the first aspect and negative with regard to the second aspect. Indeed, almost one in two respondents report participating in the activities of LGBTIQ+ associations (44.8%), although – as per Table 1 – the proportion of those defining themselves as LGBTIQ+ activists is smaller (24.9%). Conversely, political mobilisation in the form of being active and participating in the initiatives of, especially, parties (8.8%), as well as non-party political collectives (11.8%) and even trade unions (11.1%) is much rarer, contributing to the idea that the societal role of such intermediate bodies is declining (e.g., Ebbinghaus & Visser, 2000; van Biezen et al., 2012). It follows that, contrary to the widespread stereotype that sees members of the Italian LGBTIQ+ community as very highly involved both politically and in LGBTIQ+ associations, the overlap between these two contexts of civil and political mobilisation captures a mere one out of 20 of our Italian LGBTIQ+ respondents (5.9%).

If we were to vaguely follow a “funnel-of-causality” approach to the formulation of political preferences and, especially, electoral behaviour (Campbell, et al., 1960), the first political “stop” following from the aforementioned sociodemographic characteristics of our Italian LGBTIQ+ respondents would be their left-right self-placement. Indeed, amongst our political variables, this heuristic best taps into more general political values, as it ultimately captures people's predispositions towards

Table 3. LGBTIQ+ respondents' civic and political mobilisation ("being active in"/"participating in the activities related to" mentioned contexts).

Active in associations	% of sample (N=2604)
Active in 1 association	50
Active in 2 associations	22.9
Active in more than 2 associations	27.1
Active in LGBTIQ+ association	44.8
Active in political party	8.8
Active in LGBTIQ+ association and political party	5.9
Active in trade union	11.1
Active in non-party political association	11.8

legitimacy (on the right) and illegitimacy (on the left) of inequality across several political, economic, and socio-cultural domains (e.g., Bobbio, 1997; White, 2011; Trastulli, 2022). Based on both previous empirical evidence (e.g., Prearo et al., 2024) and their status as a socially stigmatised minority striving for the expansion of rights and greater equality, we would expect LGBTIQ+ citizens to consistently self-identify on the left of the political spectrum. This expectation is corroborated by our data, as per Table 4: a whopping 89.7% of our Italian LGBTIQ+ respondents placed themselves left-of-centre, with almost three out of four defining themselves as left-wing (72.3%). This leaves very few LGBTIQ+ respondents in the centre (3.1%) and right-of-centre (3.3%), as well as in the response category 'Refuse to self-place' – which in Italy is notoriously primed by the presence of a *sui generis* formation in the Five Star Movement (e.g., Mosca & Tronconi, 2019). In sum, as per existing evidence and prior theoretical hunches, it seems as if Italian LGBTIQ+ citizens are, in fact, able to place themselves along the left-right spectrum and have very clear ideas concerning their location along this political continuum – which is much further to the left than the Italian general population (Prearo et al., 2024).

Do the left-wing values of our Italian LGBTIQ+ respondents subsequently translate into coherent issue opinions? Our survey featured the traditional question on which is the most important issue for the people who took our questionnaire, with a broad range of topics that featured in recent and current Italian public debate. As per Table 5, the left-leaning self-identification of Italian LGBTIQ+ citizens is fully reflected in the top-3 most important issues that they reported. In particular, socio-economic inequalities constitute by far the most important issue for our LGBTIQ+ respondents, having been deemed as such in three out of 10 cases (29.2%, compared to a much lower 8.4% amongst the Italian general

Table 4. Left-right self-placement of LGBTIQ+ respondents.

Left-right self-placement	% of sample (N=2604)
Left (0-2)	72.3
Centre-left (3-4)	17.4
Centre (5)	3.1
Centre-right (6-7)	1.9
Right (8-10)	1.4
Refuse to self-place	3.5

population; Prearo et al., 2024). Furthermore, the following two political issues on this 'podium' of most important topics are climate change and environmental sustainability (17.6%) and the public health system (12.6%). Albeit still a relevant issue – in fact, the most important issue in every one out of 10 respondents (10.1%) –, civil (i.e., LGBTIQ+) rights do not emerge as the main political concern for Italian LGBTIQ+ citizens: their role is prominent, but not primary or exclusive of other political priorities. In this regard, our public-opinion evidence converges with elite-level findings on the political priorities of Italian LGBTIQ+ politicians (Prearo & Trastulli, 2025). On the other hand, other issues to which much attention is devoted by political elites and academic enquiry, such as immigration, constitutional reforms, and terrorism, do not emerge as actually important in the lives of Italian LGBTIQ+ citizens.

Furthermore, concerning two highly salient issues such as climate change and, amongst the general population and in party rhetoric, immigration, we know from existing studies that LGBTIQ+ citizens generally display supportive positions towards multiculturalism and migrants on the one hand – although, within the homonationalism literature, there is a certain tension between viewpoints as such (Turnbull-Dugarte, 2021) and those arguing that LGBTIQ+ citizens are not significantly more pro-immigration than their cis and heterosexual counterparts (Wurthmann, 2024) –, and environmental sustainability on the other hand (Hertzog, 1996; Denise, 2017; Hunklinger & Kleer, 2024). To this end, our data on Italian LGBTIQ+ citizens is fully in line with existing empirics derived from most other national contexts. First, as per Table 6, our Italian LGBTIQ+ sample overwhelmingly supports immigration (89.3%), with a mere one out of 10 respondents divided between those who are against (4.7%) or, in most cases, neither against nor in favour of immigration (5.5%) – thus aligning with conclusions such as Turnbull-Dugarte's (2021). Second, Table 7 shows that more than nine in 10 of our Italian LGBTIQ+ respondents (90.3%) consider climate change as a high-priority political issue –

Table 5. Most important issue for Italian LGBTIQ+ respondents.

Most important issue	% of sample (N=2604)
Socioeconomic inequalities	29.2
Climate change and environmental sustainability	17.6
Public health system	12.7
Civil rights	10.1
Fiscal evasion	6.5
Inflation and rising prices	4.2
Economic growth	3.3
Unemployment	3.2
Wars	3.1
Political corruption	2.6
Sovereign debt	2.4
Immigration	1.1
Crime	0.7
Taxes	0.6
Energy supplies	0.5
Constitutional reforms	0.5
Terrorism	0.1
AI	0.1

fully in line with their leftist political orientations (Off & Trastulli, forthcoming) –, whilst those who think the opposite and assign low priority to this issue are a tiny minority (1.5%). Of course, this markedly pro-immigration and pro-environmental configuration of public opinion amongst our Italian LGBTIQ+ respondents – against much lower rates of support for immigration (20.1%, versus 59.6% against) and prioritising environmental issues (high priority = 58.4%, medium priority = 31.5%, low priority = 7.1%) in the Italian general population (Prearo et al., 2024) – emerges even with our following methodological best practices in presenting them with two equal and alternative viewpoints in our formulation of the question, since we mentioned that people refer to this issue alternatively as an “emergency” or a “hoax”.

So far, the presented evidence on the politics of Italian LGBTIQ+ citizens is in line with existing knowledge in the subfield of LGBTIQ+ public opinion and political participation, highlighting a clear left-wing profile of this subpopulation. Of course, we expect that such a clearly defined political profile is partly a function of the self-selected nature of our sample (similarly to, e.g., Hunklinger & Ferch, 2020; Hunklinger & Kleer, 2024), which – despite the aforementioned precautions in our sampling strategy – inevitably attracts those LGBTIQ+ respondents who are more politically engaged and, in this case, even more left-wing than in subsamples from general-population surveys (e.g., Prearo et al. 2024). Not-

Table 6. Attitudes on immigration of Italian LGBTIQ+ respondents.

Attitudes on immigration	% of sample (N=2604)
Against (0-4)	4.7
Neither against nor in favour (5)	5.5
In favour (6-10)	89.3

Table 7. Priority assigned to climate change by Italian LGBTIQ+ respondents.

Priority of climate change	% of sample (N=2604)
High priority	90.3
Medium priority	7.9
Low Priority	1.5

withstanding this important caveat, are these leftist values and issue attitudes reflected in coherent patterns of voting behaviour once these Italian LGBTIQ+ citizens go to the polls? Before delving into this aspect, it is first necessary to look at whether this subpopulation tends to go out and vote, or rather often opts not to participate electorally and hence abstain. To this end, two general and opposing viewpoints may emerge: whilst, on the one hand, the sociopolitical stigmatisation of minority groups may lead to a sense of perceived inefficacy and consequent withdrawal from politics (e.g., Fraga, 2018; Barber & Holbein, 2022), on the other hand such stigmatised minorities may be rationally incentivised to participate politically and electorally to positively change their living conditions, particularly by supporting parties and candidates that may increase their well-being through policy once in power.

From a comparative perspective, the latter seems to be the case for LGBTIQ+ citizens in contemporary Western Europe, who have been shown to display higher turnout rates than their cis and hetero counterparts – indeed, going out to vote “like their rights depended on it” (Turnbull-Dugarte & Townsley, 2020; also see Grah, 2024). Likewise, our empirical evidence based on Italian LGBTIQ+ respondents seems to also be in line with this viewpoint on the high predisposition to vote of citizens from gender and sexual minorities. Table 8 shows that more than 70% (71.6%) of our LGBTIQ+ sample reports having “always” voted in their lives, whilst an additional 22.3% declare having voted often. The historic predisposition to abstain is hence relegated to a mere almost-5% of our Italian LGBTIQ+ respondents, highlighting higher levels than amongst Italians at large (e.g., 53.3% “always”, “rarely” plus “never” around 13%; Prearo et al., 2024).

Table 8. Historical predisposition to vote within Italian LGBTIQ+ sample.

Thinking about elections in general, how often did you vote in your life?	% of sample (N=2604)
Always	71.6
Often	22.3
Rarely	4.2
Never	0.7

Whilst a broad question on the tendency to vote in elections may be answered in general and, therefore, potentially imprecise terms, clearer answers may be elicited by referring to a recent and substantively important electoral contest. Therefore, in our survey, we opted for a separate question on having participated in the 2022 Italian general election. This latest national contest was extremely important in recent Italian political history not only because it gave the country its first-ever government led by an RRP (Chiaramonte et al., 2022), but also – and relatedly – because it marked the least participated “first-order” election (Reif & Schmitt, 1980) in Italian history (Angelucci et al., 2024). To this end, compared to the abstention rate of 36.1% amongst the general population at large, a much lower percentage of our LGBTIQ+ sample – 10% – reports not having voted in this important electoral contest, against 88.4% who did, as per Table 9. Again, this would also seem to go in the direction of LGBTIQ+ citizens being incentivised to participate more and vote “like their rights depended on it”, in line with the above evidence – although, here, it is urgent to once more recall the (necessarily) non-representative nature of our survey data.

Notwithstanding this consideration, we can safely assert that Italian LGBTIQ+ citizens in our sample displayed high rates of participation in the 2022 Italian general election – in fact, higher than the general population in Italy. On that occasion, how did they vote – specifically, for *whom*?

A by-now established tenet of the LGBTIQ+ politics subfield and particular the revived “lavender vote” research agenda (e.g., Hertzog, 1996; Bailey, 1999; Egan, 2012; Turnbull-Dugarte, 2020; Jones, 2021; Wurthmann, 2023) is that a) LGBTIQ+ citizens display different voting behaviour than their cis and hetero counterparts, and that b) this occurs specifically in a more left-wing direction. As per Table 10, this expectation is fully confirmed vis-à-vis the voting behaviour of our Italian LGBTIQ+ respondents in the 2022 general election, since – in line with all evidence above – they generally voted much more to the left than the average voter. The larg-

Table 9. Participation in latest Italian general election (2022).

Voted in 2022 Italian general election	% of sample (N=2604)
Yes	88.4
No	10

est party in our LGBTIQ+ sample is the mainstream centre-left Democratic Party, which in proportion was voted twice as much amongst our respondents (38.9%) than in the general population (actual overall vote share of 19%, its second-lowest ever). The second largest party in our sample is the left-wing Green-Left Alliance, whose size is almost tenfold in our LGBTIQ+ sample (28.4%) compared to its actual result (3.6%). This means that the two unequivocally left-of-centre parties within the Italian party system accounted, on their own, for more than two out of three of our LGBTIQ+ respondents who reported having voted at the 2022 general election. Although this may seem as an overinflated leftist vote at face value, this data is perfectly in line with comparable evidence available from other countries on the voting behaviour of LGBTIQ+ citizens.⁶ Consequently, the opposite side of the coin is the underrepresentation, in our Italian LGBTIQ+ sample, of the centre-right, right-wing, and in particular radical right vote, with winning Brothers of Italy – overall the largest party with 26% of the vote share – chosen by a mere 0.8% of our Italian LGBTIQ+ respondents, who overall voted for one of the three largest right-of-centre party only in 1.3% of cases. Therefore, it is safe to say that – in line with most evidence in the literature (e.g., Spierings, 2021; Turnbull-Dugarte, 2022) including, e.g., on their pro-immigration stances (Turnbull-Dugarte, 2021) – we do not find evidence within our sample in favour of successful homonationalist electoral targeting of LGBTIQ+ voters on the part of Italian RRPs, despite their strategic attempts: i.e., cis LGB voters – but not trans and non-binary – supporting RRPs that instrumentally push messages in their favour, often in an anti-migrant and specifically anti-Muslim fashion, as recently done by Brothers of Italy’s youth wing “Atreju”.⁷ Lastly, within this markedly left-wing vote of our Italian LGBTIQ+ respondents at the 2022 general election, it is also substantively interesting to note that centrist and pro-EU formations such as More Europe are considerably overrepresented (15.2% here versus its overall vote share of 2.8%), whilst the

⁶ See, for instance, recent data on Germany: <https://www.uni-giessen.de/en/faculties/f03/departments/dps/research/areas/germany/lgbtiq>.

⁷ See, for instance, https://www.instagram.com/p/C7D04VZNS_S/, https://www.instagram.com/atreju_ufficiale/p/DC1n7fANVwO/.

Table 10. Vote choice of Italian LGBTIQ+ respondents at 2022 general election.

Party voted for in 2022 general election	% of valid responses (N=2179)
<i>Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra</i>	28.4
<i>Azione – Italia Viva</i>	4.7
<i>Forza Italia</i>	0.4
<i>Fratelli d'Italia</i> (Brothers of Italy)	0.8
<i>Lega</i>	0.1
<i>Movimento 5 Stelle</i> (Five Star Movement)	4.7
<i>Others</i>	6.6
<i>Partito Democratico</i> (Democratic Party)	38.9
<i>Più Europa</i> (More Europe)	15.2

atypical Five Star Movement is vastly underrepresented (4.7% versus 15.4%).

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper, we introduced a novel survey investigation on the politics of Italian LGBTIQ+ citizens to the literature on LGBTIQ+ politics, Italian politics, and electoral studies more broadly. Our data provided, for the first time, large-N empirical evidence on the public opinion, political preferences, and voting behaviour of Italians from gender and sexual minorities, filling a crucial substantive gap in scholarly knowledge. As our field of inquiry is traditionally marked by difficulties in effectively taking forward scientific investigations of LGBTIQ+ objects of study and particularly so in Italy, not least because of the widespread lack of individual-level political data on LGBTIQ+ citizens, this first presentation of our original survey could not have been complete without mention of the design and methodological difficulties we encountered along the way – as well as the strategies we employed to overcome them to the best of our capabilities. Through our aptly devised sampling strategy and large self-selected sample of Italian LGBTIQ+ citizens, we could thus provide readers with first empirical evidence on the political landscape of fellow Italians from stigmatised gender and sexual minorities. This is a critical contribution, not only to the subfield of LGBTIQ+ politics within the political science, but also to the discipline itself (Ayoub, 2022; Paternotte 2018), as the lack of scientific works within electoral studies on LGBTIQ+ politics often leads – in our view – to the diffusion of notions in public debates that are based on stereotypes, preconceptions, and caricatures rather than empirical evidence.

Here, we present data on a large sample of LGBTIQ+ Italians – characterised by interesting internal differences

in terms of LGBTIQ+ subgroups and sociodemographic composition – that, albeit by design not representative of the unknown Italian LGBTIQ+ population, is active in civil society, politically and electorally mobilised, and overwhelmingly left-wing in its values, issue attitudes, and vote choice, even when – in the vast majority of cases – respondents are not LGBTIQ+ activists.

Our contribution to the literature is not limited to providing such evidence and introducing the data upon which it is based, hence opening up the potential for a more informed public debate and providing interested colleagues with novel and previously unavailable information on Italian LGBTIQ+ citizens. The inclusion of stigmatised social minorities, their behaviour and demands, within a scientific discipline is a societally important and impactful act of inclusion, elevating the dignity of LGBTIQ+ politics, the scholars that are interested in it, and the subjects of such inquiry, to the level of other subfields in the political and social sciences. It is, in sum, a concrete step towards greater inclusivity in our work.

LGBTIQ+ citizens in Western societies, including in Italy, constitute a sizeable subpopulation, which is politically active and willing to engage, and may hence constitute an important electoral constituency. More generally, further stimulating the political participation and – especially – representation of stigmatised minorities is fundamental to avoid their potential social alienation. To these ends, we believe that only an evidence-driven approach can lead such electoral and policy efforts by both political parties and institutions, speaking to the broader real-world impact of providing such necessary data as per our paper.

Finally, scholars can play a more effective role in pursuing this impactful agenda by deepening their research on further aspects of LGBTIQ+ politics, including within the subfield of electoral studies. Greater data availability can only mean an expanded possibility to empirically explore the determinants of LGBTIQ+ citizens' political participation, issue positions, and voting behaviour, as well as general-population attitudes towards citizens and political élites from gender and sexual minorities, as well as their political causes, with increasing degrees of methodological sophistication. This is an effort that was initiated long before our present contribution in other Western countries, leading to a burgeoning, lively, and now-established scientific field of comparative research. Our expectation and hope is that, in providing new instruments and information as first shared in this paper, such efforts can only grow and further develop from here in Italian electoral studies as well.

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Percezioni dell'inciviltà politica: fattori predittivi dall'area politica e mediale

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Abstract. Political incivility is a pervasive phenomenon in contemporary democracies, yet research has predominantly focused on socio-demographic and media factors to explain public perceptions, overlooking the relationship between citizens and politics. This study addresses this gap by examining how trust in democratic institutions, political efficacy, and anti-political attitudes influence evaluations of political elites' uncivil behaviors in Italy, a context marked by widespread political disaffection. Using a representative population survey conducted at the end of the 2024 European Elections, the research reveals the crucial role of democratic trust and political efficacy in heightening sensitivity to elite incivility. Contrary to expectations, anti-political attitudes do not directly affect incivility perceptions, suggesting that in a context of generalized distrust and political malaise, anti-politics has become a cross-cutting sentiment, limiting its utility as a predictor of differential sensitivity to uncivil behaviors. Beyond political predictors, the study examines media consumption patterns, revealing contrasting effects: while intensive social media use for political purposes creates desensitization to inflammatory rhetoric and norm-violating behaviors, news avoidance also diminishes the capacity to detect uncivil expressions.

Keywords: European elections, predictors of political incivility, political efficacy, anti-politics, trust.

1. INTRODUZIONE

Sono ormai diversi anni che vengono pubblicate dichiarazioni e dati di sondaggio che denunciano un aumento dell'inciviltà politica nelle democrazie occidentali al punto da essere ormai un fenomeno entrato a pieno titolo nel dibattito pubblico e nell'agenda dei ricercatori. Tuttavia, pur se da anni al centro dell'attenzione degli studiosi¹, la ricerca empirica sull'inciviltà politica non ha ancora prodotto risultati certi in merito alle variabili che influiscono sulla percezione del fenomeno da parte dei cittadini. Prima di addentrarci

¹ Per dare un'idea della longevità della presenza del fenomeno nell'agenda degli studiosi è sufficiente citare il Symposium: Political Civility ospitato dalla rivista *Political Science & Politics*, nel 2012 (July, 2012, v. 45, n.3).

nello studio di tali variabili, è importante chiarire la definizione del concetto che sarà assunta a riferimento.

Nel presente lavoro adottiamo una definizione di inciviltà politica che comprende tre dimensioni interrelate, concependola come una mancanza di rispetto per le norme sociali e culturali che regolano sia le interazioni personali sia il funzionamento dei sistemi democratici (Bentivegna & Rega, 2022). Seguendo la letteratura che ha evidenziato la multidimensionalità del concetto (Muddiman, 2017; Stryker, Conway & Danielson, 2016), ci concentriamo su tre dimensioni principali: la mancanza di rispetto verso gli altri (comportamenti di maleducazione, interruzioni, uso di volgarità), la mancanza di rispetto per i valori democratici (demonizzare gli avversari, diffondere falsità, usare un linguaggio discriminatorio) e la mancanza di rispetto per le istituzioni democratiche (comportamenti inappropriati nei luoghi simbolo della democrazia, mancare di rispetto per i simboli della storia nazionale). Questo approccio multidimensionale ci consente di catturare le diverse sfaccettature della percezione che hanno i cittadini delle varie forme di inciviltà politica e, successivamente, di identificarne i predittori attraverso modelli di regressione.

Questa chiarezza definitoria è particolarmente necessaria considerando che la frammentarietà e, talvolta, contraddittorietà dei risultati finora ottenuti derivano, come è noto, dal particolare sguardo di chi osserva il fenomeno (Herbst, 2010), ma anche dalle specificità dei contesti nei quali le ricerche sono state realizzate e dalle piattaforme analizzate. Così, per esempio, la preponderanza della ricerca condotta nel contesto statunitense (Walter, 2021) pone evidenti problemi di comparabilità con quella condotta in altri contesti, con assetti politici e mediali spesso significativamente diversi.

Con queste premesse, il nostro studio si concentra sull'Italia, dove l'ondata di neo-populismo e l'emergere di sentimenti di antipolitica – manifestatisi a partire dagli anni Novanta e cresciuti fino a conquistare posizioni di governo tramite nuove e vecchie formazioni partitiche – si sono sviluppati in un sistema mediale caratterizzato da un persistente parallelismo politico (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) che continua a influenzare le dinamiche comunicative contemporanee (Giglietto et al., 2024). Proprio questo intreccio tra antipolitica e parallelismo mediale crea un terreno fertile per ipotizzare significative conseguenze sul fronte della percezione dell'inciviltà delle élite politiche da parte dei cittadini. La visione antipolitica, infatti, si caratterizza per un'ostilità verso le istituzioni politiche formali (Mete, 2022a) e alimenta una rappresentazione di conflitto permanente e irrisolvibile tra cittadini ed élite. Secondo questa prospettiva, le classi dirigenti tradizionali vengono concepite come

autoreferenziali e completamente disconnesse dai problemi reali dei cittadini. Tale rappresentazione negativa dell'élite politica si estende inevitabilmente alla politica stessa, arrivando talvolta a far coincidere la politica con il fenomeno dell'inciviltà, come emerso in un recente studio di Bentivegna e Rega (2026).

Oltre a generare disaffezione verso le istituzioni, i sentimenti antipolitici incoraggiano comportamenti comunicativi – le cosiddette “bad manners” (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014) – che mirano a segnalare un rifiuto delle convenzioni e delle pratiche della politica tradizionale. Il ricorso a un linguaggio di pancia, viscerale ed emotivo risponde esattamente a tale obiettivo e viene largamente utilizzato da attori anti-establishment e non solo, diventando un registro comunicativo diffuso nell'intero panorama politico. L'adozione di questa strategia comunicativa ispirata al sentimento antipolitico diventa, quindi, sempre più pervasiva al punto da caratterizzare l'idea stessa di “politica” elaborata dai cittadini. Un'idea che si salda e si rafforza con il sentimento di sfiducia nei confronti della democrazia, soprattutto di quella rappresentativa (Kriesi, 2013), che domina il pubblico sentire nelle democrazie contemporanee. D'altro canto, se le istituzioni democratiche sono raffigurate come inefficienti e distanti, è difficile pensare che un sentimento di fiducia possa associarsi a esse e ai meccanismi della rappresentanza coinvolti.

Da qui, le radici di quell'idea che circola ormai da decenni secondo la quale nei paesi occidentali la democrazia versa in una crisi permanente, che si manifesta con numerose sembianze e che determina sentimenti di lontananza e cinismo nei suoi confronti. In questa sede, il nostro obiettivo è indagare il rapporto che intercorre tra la percezione di espressioni di inciviltà delle élite politiche da parte dei cittadini e i loro sentimenti di distanza e sfiducia nei confronti della democrazia. Si tratta di sentimenti che certamente si nutrono di aspettative deluse, domande inevase di maggiore protezione e così via. A nostro avviso, però, accanto a tali ragioni di natura più propriamente politica, va preso in considerazione anche il coverage mediale che tradizionalmente dà spazio a contrapposizioni tra attori e/o schieramenti e amplifica la copertura di eventi che violano regole di comportamento consolidate come quelle incivili (Bentivegna & Rega, 2024a) e che arrivano al punto di trasformare il fenomeno della corruzione in uno spettacolo da offrire ai propri lettori/telespettatori (Mancini, Marchetti & Mazzoni, 2024). Il combinato disposto di attitudine antipolitica, senso di inefficacia politica, sfiducia nella democrazia e la narrazione della politica offerta dai media offre le coordinate per ricostruire il contesto entro il quale i cittadini percepiscono gli episodi di inci-

viltà politica riconducibili agli attori politici. La natura e il peso di tali coordinate costituiranno l'argomento delle prossime pagine, nelle quali si presenteranno i risultati di una survey condotta su un campione rappresentativo di cittadini italiani, chiamati a esprimersi sul livello di inciviltà presente in alcune performance degli attori politici. È possibile anticipare sin da ora che sfiducia nella democrazia, attitudine antipolitica e senso di inefficacia politica influiscono, in modo non univoco, sulla percezione dell'inciviltà politica, associandosi ora a forme di desensibilizzazione, ora di sensibilizzazione. In modo analogo, i consumi informativi e l'uso dei social media per ragioni politiche attivano reazioni di segno diverso (ora una percezione più netta, ora una percezione più blanda) a seconda che i soggetti abbiano o meno interesse per la politica.

2. QUALI FATTORI INFLUENZANO LA PERCEZIONE DELL'INCIVILTÀ POLITICA?

L'individuazione delle variabili che si associano a una maggiore o minore percezione dell'inciviltà politica ha alle spalle una storia lunga quanto l'interesse per il tema. Nonostante ciò, non vi è accordo tra gli studiosi sulla rilevanza delle specifiche variabili nella determinazione di una maggiore o minore percezione del fenomeno, con l'eccezione delle variabili socio-demografiche. In questo caso, infatti, vi è una sostanziale unanimità nell'attribuire alle donne e agli intervistati anziani una percezione più netta (Bentivegna, Rega & Boccia Artieri, 2024; Conway & Stryker, 2021; Kenski, Coe & Rains, 2020) mentre di segno inverso è il rapporto con il livello di istruzione: al suo crescere decresce la percezione dell'inciviltà (Bentivegna & Rega, 2024a; Kenski, et al., 2020). Prima di procedere ulteriormente, crediamo che sia utile chiarire alcuni concetti fondamentali a cui faremo riferimento nel corso dello studio. Quando parliamo di "percezione netta" dell'inciviltà politica, ci riferiamo alla capacità dei cittadini di riconoscere chiaramente e valutare come più incivili (su una scala da 1 a 10) determinati comportamenti messi in atto dagli attori politici. Una percezione più netta dell'inciviltà riflette una maggiore sensibilità nei suoi confronti, manifestandosi attraverso valutazioni più severe e, prevedibilmente, una maggiore disposizione a stigmatizzare tali comportamenti. Questa sensibilità è proprio ciò che spiega le differenze socio-demografiche nella percezione dell'inciviltà menzionate sopra.

È importante sottolineare, tuttavia, che il semplice riconoscimento dell'inciviltà non equivale necessariamente alla sua condanna: un individuo può infatti rico-

noscere un comportamento come incivile e, contemporaneamente, tollerarlo o addirittura considerarlo come parte normale del confronto politico. Questa distinzione è particolarmente rilevante quando analizziamo due fenomeni apparentemente contraddittori che emergono nella letteratura sulla percezione dell'inciviltà politica, vale a dire la "desensitization" e la "sensitization" (Bentivegna et al., 2024). Con "desensitization" (desensibilizzazione) ci riferiamo a una scarsa sensibilità nei confronti dell'inciviltà dovuta all'esposizione ripetuta, un concetto che Kenski et al. (2020) hanno ripreso dagli studi sull'assuefazione alla violenza nei media e dal lavoro di Gervais (2014). Come evidenziano questi autori: "Scholars interested in media violence have long known that repeated exposure to mediated acts of violence desensitizes individuals, emotionally and physiologically, to such violence [...]. Incivility might function similarly. Enough exposure and a certain message may no longer seem so uncivil, which could in turn lead people to be more likely to espouse similar messages themselves" (Kenski et al., 2020, 799). Il termine complementare, "sensitization" (sensibilizzazione), si riferisce invece all'aumentata consapevolezza e reattività verso l'inciviltà politica, che porta sia a una maggiore capacità di percepire un comportamento incivile come tale sia a valutarlo più severamente.

Questi fenomeni di desensibilizzazione e sensibilizzazione ci aiutano anche a comprendere meglio come utilizziamo in questo lavoro concetti quali "accettazione" o "normalizzazione" dell'inciviltà politica. Ci riferiamo infatti al processo di graduale assuefazione appena descritto, misurato attraverso una minore percezione della gravità nelle nostre scale di valutazione. Tale approccio si distingue da altri aspetti dell'inciviltà studiati in letteratura, come il potere persuasorio dei messaggi incivili esaminato da Vargiu et al. (2024). Mentre in quel caso analizzano come l'inciviltà possa influenzare opinioni e posizioni politiche, nonostante (o grazie alla) sua natura trasgressiva, la nostra ricerca identifica i fattori che influenzano il grado di sensibilità percettiva verso comportamenti che violano le norme di civiltà politica.

Tornando al ruolo delle variabili che influenzano la percezione dell'inciviltà politica, al di là di quelle socio-demografiche ormai largamente acquisite, risulta più complessa l'individuazione di un nesso univoco tra la percezione del fenomeno e altri fattori rilevanti come il consumo mediale, l'uso dei social media e l'affiliazione politica. In questi ambiti, infatti, i processi di desensibilizzazione e sensibilizzazione appena descritti possono manifestarsi con particolare evidenza e dinamiche specifiche.

Riguardo alla *media consumption* sono emersi risultati spesso contrastanti, che variano a seconda dei contesti e del tipo di fonte informativa utilizzata. Se dal lavoro

seminale di York (2013) emergeva che i telespettatori di notiziari via cavo sono maggiormente esposti a manifestazioni di inciviltà politica rispetto a coloro che seguono principalmente i notiziari televisivi tradizionali, tale esposizione non implica necessariamente una maggiore sensibilità verso il fenomeno. Al contrario, in molti casi un elevato consumo informativo si associa a una minore percezione dell'inciviltà, confermando l'ipotesi della desensibilizzazione. Ciò è emerso, per esempio, dallo studio di Kenski et al. (2020), che hanno mostrato come i forti consumatori di quotidiani cartacei abbiano una percezione meno spiccata delle forme di inciviltà – in particolare per quanto riguarda l'uso di epiteti denigratori (name-calling) – e, similmente, da quello di Bentivegna e Rega (2024a) che hanno registrato una percezione più bassa dell'inciviltà politica da parte di forti consumatori di notizie mediante quotidiani e talk show televisivi/radiofonici².

Questa ridotta sensibilità al fenomeno può essere spiegata mediante il frequente ricorso da parte delle testate giornalistiche a codici emotivi e frame narrativi caratterizzati dal conflitto e dall'attacco tra i vari attori. In tale contesto, il racconto giornalistico dell'inciviltà può talvolta trasformarsi in una sorta di intrattenimento (Poljak, 2024), equivalente a quello offerto “da molti sport estremi” (Mutz, 2015), che non solo procura distrazione ma appare ormai “normalizzato” nell'offerta quotidiana mediale. Tale modalità di trattamento può far sì che l'inciviltà venga percepita come ordinaria, soprattutto per gli individui poco interessati alle vicende politiche e alle relative dinamiche.

Riguardo all'uso dei social media in ambito politico, la ricerca mostra come tale fattore si caratterizzi come un forte predittore della desensibilizzazione all'inciviltà, particolarmente evidente nei soggetti con un elevato livello di engagement (Bentivegna et al., 2024). Al contrario, i soggetti con un basso livello di coinvolgimento manifestano una maggiore *sensitization*, mostrando si più reattivi di fronte agli episodi di inciviltà. Questo conferma il ruolo decisivo dell'ambiente digitale nell'attivare forme di desensibilizzazione nei confronti di tali comportamenti (Song & Wu, 2018). A questo proposito, è importante notare che non si tratta di un'associazione inedita. Infatti, è noto il legame tra viralità e comportamenti trasgressivi o provocatori nei social media, tanto da essere premiato e valorizzato dagli algoritmi adottati dalle piattaforme (Bøggild, Campbell, Nielsen et al., 2021; Frimer, Aujla, Feinberg et al., 2023).

In ultimo, il ruolo dell'affiliazione politica nell'influenzare la percezione dell'inciviltà appare meno chiaro rispetto alle variabili finora esaminate. In numerose ricerche, infatti, emerge che gli intervistati del Partito Repubblicano sono meno sensibili all'inciviltà di quanto non lo siano quelli del Partito Democratico (Berry & Sobieraj, 2014; Conway & Stryker, 2021; Fridkin & Kenney, 2019), con l'eccezione del lavoro condotto da Mudiman et al. (2021), dal quale risulta che Democratici e Repubblicani reagiscono all'inciviltà in maniera simile. A conferma della diversa percezione tra gli elettori dei due partiti si colloca, invece, lo studio di Walter e Kurlaca (2024), dal quale emerge che i Democratici sono più propensi a condannare l'inciviltà mentre i Repubblicani tendono a giustificarla quando proviene dagli esponenti del proprio partito, valutandola come un segno di lealtà. Nel contesto italiano, una percezione più netta si registra tra gli elettori di sinistra, soprattutto durante i periodi lontani dalla campagna elettorale (Bentivegna et al., 2024), vale a dire nella *everyday politics*.

La rapida panoramica sulla letteratura presentata fino a questo punto evidenzia come, nonostante gli studi esistenti si siano concentrati soprattutto sulle variabili socio-demografiche, il consumo mediale e l'affiliazione politica, più limitata è stata l'attenzione offerta al ruolo di indicatori propriamente politici in relazione alla percezione dell'inciviltà politica. Fattori come il sentimento di inefficacia politica, l'atteggiamento antipolitico e la sfiducia nella democrazia potrebbero, infatti, avere un ruolo determinante nell'influenzare sia i processi di *sensitization* che di *desensitization* precedentemente descritti. Un'eccezione significativa in questo ambito è rappresentata dal lavoro già citato di Vargiu et al. (2024), che hanno esaminato come gli atteggiamenti populistici possano influenzare l'accettazione e l'apprezzamento dell'inciviltà politica, sostenendo che “there are several reasons to support the notion that there is ‘an elective affinity’ between populist attitudes and a heightened acceptance and even appreciation of political incivility” (3). È interessante ricordare i risultati contrastanti emersi da quella indagine condotta in Svizzera e negli Stati Uniti: mentre in Svizzera non sono emersi elementi certi a sostegno della relazione ipotizzata, negli Stati Uniti si è colta una relazione diretta tra attitudini populiste e potere persuasorio dei messaggi incivili. Stante questi risultati, la nostra ricerca adotta un approccio differente, focalizzandosi su altri indicatori politici (sentimenti antipolitici, senso di inefficacia e sfiducia nella democrazia) e sulla loro influenza nel rendere i cittadini più o meno sensibili alle manifestazioni di inciviltà nel discorso politico.

² Al contrario, nel caso del consumo di news televisive tale associazione con la percezione dell'inciviltà non è emersa, confermando il consumo superficiale e distratto tradizionalmente attribuito agli utenti di tali notizie (Bentivegna & Rega, 2024a).

3. LO STUDIO: IPOTESI E DOMANDE DI RICERCA

Al di là delle sfumature emerse dai diversi lavori di ricerca empirica, la necessità di indagare il nesso tra rapporto con la politica e percezione dei messaggi incivili adottati dai rappresentanti politici appare decisamente attuale, tanto più considerando l'avanzata progressiva di sentimenti antipolitici nelle democrazie contemporanee. Tali sentimenti, che si manifestano come diffidenza e ostilità crescente verso la classe politica, possono influenzare profondamente il modo in cui i cittadini valutano determinate forme comunicative del dibattito pubblico, particolarmente quelle caratterizzate da inciviltà. Un aspetto centrale di questo fenomeno è la progressiva normalizzazione di un linguaggio emotivo, volgare e aggressivo, al quale i cittadini con forte orientamento antipolitico potrebbero gradualmente assuefarsi, fino a considerare le espressioni incivili come forme ordinarie e accettabili del confronto politico. È importante sottolineare come tale assuefazione non sia casuale, ma si intrecci frequentemente con quella stessa percezione di estraneità e distanza dalla politica che caratterizza i sentimenti antipolitici, accompagnata da un crescente senso di inefficacia politica personale e da una profonda sfiducia nelle istituzioni democratiche (Italian National Election Studies, 2023). Questi elementi, interconnessi tra loro, predispongono potenzialmente i cittadini ad accettare più facilmente le espressioni incivili, legittimandole come componente costitutiva del discorso politico contemporaneo.

In un contesto come quello italiano, caratterizzato da una lunga storia di movimenti antisistema, sentimenti antipolitici e crescente disaffezione democratica (Orsina, 2018), risulta particolarmente rilevante testare empiricamente se e in quale misura questi fattori contribuiscano alla “normalizzazione” dell'inciviltà politica nel dibattito pubblico e nella percezione collettiva.

Sulla base di queste considerazioni, formuliamo le seguenti ipotesi:

H1: I cittadini con forte orientamento antipolitico valutano in modo più blando le espressioni di inciviltà degli attori politici.

H2: I cittadini con elevata percezione di estraneità dalla politica, senso di inefficacia politica e sfiducia nelle istituzioni democratiche accettano maggiormente le espressioni di inciviltà politica.

A partire da queste ipotesi, la nostra ricerca intende rispondere al seguente interrogativo:

RQ.1 In che modo la percezione dell'inciviltà è influenzata dal rapporto dei cittadini con la politica (intesa come

l'orientamento antipolitico, la distanza dal sistema politico, l'inefficacia politica e la sfiducia nelle istituzioni democratiche)?

Riteniamo, poi, che nel determinare una maggiore o minore severità nella valutazione delle espressioni di inciviltà da parte degli attori politici, contribuisca, anche, il rapporto con l'informazione (inteso come consumo informativo) e l'uso dei social media, in generale, e per finalità politiche, in particolare. Riguardo al primo aspetto, diverse ricerche hanno evidenziato il nesso tra consumi informativi e percezione dell'inciviltà. York (2013) ha identificato una correlazione tra l'esposizione alla tv via cavo e la valutazione dell'inciviltà nel contesto politico, mentre Gervais (2014) ha dimostrato come i fruitori di informazione politica tendano a riprodurre nei propri comportamenti comunicativi le forme di inciviltà alle quali sono esposti (effetto di “mimetismo”). Questi studi illustrano empiricamente i meccanismi già descritti di desensibilizzazione e sensibilizzazione. Da un lato, l'esposizione frequente a contenuti mediatici in cui l'inciviltà viene enfatizzata per catturare l'attenzione del pubblico (Goovaerts, 2022), offrire intrattenimento (Poljak, 2024) o sostenere specifiche posizioni politiche nella classica logica del parallelismo politico (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) può portare a una progressiva “desensitization”. In questo scenario, gli individui si abituano alla presenza di comportamenti incivili nel discorso politico, arrivando a percepirli come una componente normale e inevitabile della comunicazione politica contemporanea. Dall'altro lato, un consumo informativo più critico e consapevole può favorire il fenomeno opposto della “sensitization”, in cui i cittadini non solo percepiscono più nettamente le espressioni di inciviltà, ma le valutano anche più severamente. Questo fenomeno emerge principalmente tra i forti consumatori di media tradizionali, i quali sviluppano competenze interpretative che consentono loro di contestualizzare i contenuti informativi all'interno di un quadro più ampio. Tale domestichezza con l'informazione potenzia la loro capacità di discernere le diverse sfumature dell'inciviltà politica e di valutarle criticamente rispetto a standard normativi condivisi, aumentando così la loro reattività e sensibilità verso comportamenti che violano le norme del dibattito civile.

La variabile interveniente che possiamo ipotizzare entrare in campo è quella dell'interesse per la politica, che può far propendere per la validazione dell'ipotesi della *sensitization*.

Per quel che riguarda l'uso dei social media, diversi studi sui commenti alle notizie o sulle discussioni online hanno dimostrato che il contatto con comportamenti incivili può portare i soggetti che vi assistono a considerali normali o, addirittura, ad adottarli a loro volta (Song

& Wu, 2018). Inoltre, l'uso dei social media per informarsi sulla politica o partecipare a discussioni politiche (prendendo la parola e/o producendo materiali ad hoc, etc.) può avere un effetto anestetizzante sul piano valutativo (Hmielowski, Hutchens & Cicchirillo, 2014), modificando profondamente la percezione della gravità dell'inciviltà fino a renderla accettabile o addirittura desiderabile, come un segno di "autenticità" comunicativa. D'altro canto, se quotidianamente si assiste, o addirittura si partecipa, a discussioni nelle quali il rispetto per l'altro e i valori dell'inclusione e del riconoscimento delle opinioni altrui sono violati, la *normalizzazione* di tali forme appare molto più probabile.

Queste riflessioni sono alla base delle seguenti ipotesi:

H3: Un elevato consumo informativo può ridurre la sensibilità degli individui verso gli episodi di inciviltà politica (desensitization).

H4: Un elevato consumo informativo può accrescere la sensibilità degli individui verso gli episodi di inciviltà politica (sensitization).

H5: L'uso dei social media riduce la percezione della gravità dell'inciviltà politica.

H6: L'uso dei social media per finalità politiche (ad esempio, partecipazione a gruppi o pagine di discussione politica) riduce la percezione della gravità dell'inciviltà politica.

Da queste ipotesi derivano le seguenti domande di ricerca:

RQ2: In che modo il consumo di informazione politica influisce sulla percezione dell'inciviltà nel discorso politico?

RQ3: In che misura l'uso generale e specificamente politico dei social media modifica la valutazione dell'inciviltà nel dibattito pubblico?

4. DATI E METODOLOGIA

Per testare la validità delle nostre ipotesi e rispondere alle domande di ricerca, un campione rappresentativo della popolazione italiana è stato intervistato, con modalità CAWI, nella prima settimana di giugno 2024, ovvero nel corso dell'ultima settimana della campagna che ha preceduto il voto per il rinnovo del Parlamento Europeo. L'Istituto IPSOS ha somministrato il sondaggio (1.000 interviste) al proprio panel online utilizzando un sistema di quote per garantire la rappresentatività della popolazione³ (sesso, età, provenienza geografica, livello

di istruzione). Abbiamo intenzionalmente scelto il periodo a ridosso del voto in considerazione del fatto che tutti gli attori impegnati nella competizione sfruttano gli ultimi giorni per catturare l'interesse e il consenso dei *last minute deciders*, dando vita spesso alla cosiddetta "ugly campaign" (Klinger, Koc-Michalska & Russmann, 2022) nella quale gli episodi incivili non sono infrequenti. Il questionario utilizzato era articolato nelle seguenti aree tematiche: dati socio-demografici, consumo mediale a fini informativi, uso dei social media, rapporto con la politica (inclusi l'orientamento antipolitico, la fiducia nella democrazia e il senso di efficacia politica), percezione e valutazione dell'inciviltà.

Numerose sono state le variabili utilizzate per individuare i predittori della percezione dell'inciviltà da parte dei cittadini. Ovviamente, sono state utilizzate le variabili dell'interesse per la politica (categorizzato come basso, medio e alto) e dell'autocollocazione politica (agli intervistati è stato chiesto di categorizzare la propria affinità politica come centro, sinistra, destra o nessuna). Queste variabili sono state successivamente trasformate in variabili dummy per costruire i modelli di regressione. I consumi mediiali degli intervistati sono stati individuati tramite una batteria che comprendeva dieci elementi: telegiornali (sia nella versione tradizionale che online), quotidiani e stampa (sia nella versione tradizionale che online), radiogiornali (sia nella versione tradizionale che online), fonti giornalistiche sui social media, fonti informative sui social media, profili social di influencer, contatti personali, forum o blog, talk show, podcast newsletter. Per ciascun item, gli intervistati dovevano indicare la frequenza di uso: mai, circa una volta a settimana, più volte a settimana, tutti i giorni. L'applicazione della cluster analysis – effettuata tenendo conto dei diversi tipi di fonti informative utilizzate e del rispettivo livello di fruizione degli intervistati – ha portato all'individuazione di quattro profili distinti: *news avoiders*, *news traditionalist*, *news encounters* e *news seekers*. I *news avoiders* si caratterizzano per un rifiuto delle informazioni sia fornite dai media mainstream che dalle fonti non mainstream, in coerenza con altre ricerche europee sull'indifferenza dei cittadini verso le news (Castro, Strömbäck, Esser, et al., 2021; Strömbäck, Falasca & Kruikemeier, 2018). I *news traditionalists* consu-

³ Specificamente, il campione era costituito da 52% di intervistate di sesso femminile, 15,9% di soggetti di età inferiore ai 30 anni, 30% dai 31 ai 50 anni, 26,1% dai 51 ai 64 anni, 28% oltre i 65 anni, in possesso della

licenza elementare o media nel 10,6% dei casi, di un diploma di licenza superiore nel 50,2%, di una laurea triennale nell'11,9%, di una laurea specialistica o quinquennale nel 21% e di un titolo post-lauream nel 6,3%. Riguardo alla provenienza geografica, il 26% proveniva dal Nord-Ovest, il 20% dal Nord-Est, il 20% dal Centro, il 23% dal Sud e l'11% dalle Isole. Il progetto ha ricevuto l'approvazione etica in conformità con [oscurato per la revisione]. La fonte di finanziamento è [oscurata per la revisione]. I dati a supporto dei risultati di questo studio sono disponibili contattando il corresponding author su richiesta motivata.

mano prodotti giornalistici più volte a settimana – telegiornali e quotidiani nei diversi formati – utilizzando raramente altri tipi di informazione. I *news encounters*, all'opposto, accedono all'informazione principalmente attraverso fonti non mainstream in modo incidentale, incarnando la percezione “news find me” descritta da Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks e Ardèvol-Abreu (2017) – ovvero l'idea che non sia necessario cercare attivamente le notizie poiché si ritiene di essere sufficientemente esposti e informati attraverso i propri contatti e reti sociali. I *news seekers*, infine, mostrano un forte interesse per l'informazione, con un consumo quotidiano a tutto campo. Questa stessa articolazione è stata applicata anche all'ambito specifico delle news politiche.

Un approccio analogo è stato utilizzato per registrare la frequenza di uso quotidiana (mai, giusto il tempo di guardare gli aggiornamenti, tra le due e le quattro ore, oltre quattro ore) dei social media, ovvero Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Telegram, X (prima Twitter), WhatsApp. Infine, l'uso dei social media per finalità politiche è stato registrato tramite una batteria di cinque items: imbattersi in un contenuto elettorale, mettere mi piace o pubblicare una reaction a un contenuto politico-elettorale, condividere contenuti politici, commentare contenuti o partecipare a discussioni, pubblicare/creare contenuti politico-elettorali. Per ciascun item, gli intervistati dovevano indicare la frequenza di uso: mai, qualche volta, abbastanza spesso, tutte le volte che mi connetto. In considerazione del diverso livello di engagement proprio di ogni item (pari a 0 nel caso della lettura di contenuti, 1 pubblicare una reaction, 2 condividere, commentare o pubblicare contenuti) è stato costruito un indice additivo che variava da 0 a 2.

Infine, l'orientamento antipolitico, il senso di efficacia politica e la fiducia nella democrazia sono stati indagati tramite una batteria di 7 items ispirati in parte al lavoro di Akkerman e colleghi (2014). In particolare, l'orientamento antipolitico fa riferimento a tre indicatori, ovvero, l'Italia sarebbe governata meglio se le decisioni importanti fossero prese dai cittadini invece che dai politici eletti, fare compromessi in politica significa svendere i propri principi, i politici parlano tanto ma fanno poco. Il senso di efficacia politica è stato misurato mediante due item, vale a dire, le persone come me non hanno alcuna influenza su ciò che fa il governo e a volte la politica è così complicata che non riesco a capire ciò di cui si sta discutendo. La fiducia nella democrazia mediante due item: la democrazia è comunque preferibile a qualsiasi altra forma di governo e un leader forte alla guida del governo farebbe bene all'Italia anche se non rispettasse le regole democratiche. Per ciascun item, gli intervistati dovevano esprimere il loro accordo/disaccordo

do e i valori registrati sono stati utilizzati per costruire un indice di antipolitica, un indice di efficacia politica e un indice di fiducia nella democrazia.

La registrazione del grado di inciviltà da parte delle élite politiche è avvenuta tramite la valutazione di 15 statements – articolati in post pubblicati su Facebook e Instagram, testi di quotidiani di informazione, tweet su X o immagini – lungo una scala da 1 del tutto civile a 10 fortemente incivile. Tra i 15 statements figuravano tre items di controllo (Tab. 1). Per evitare l'effetto di response-set, gli item sono stati ruotati e intervallati da altre domande presenti nel questionario.

Per valutare la congruenza tra ciascuna coppia di elementi è stato calcolato l'alfa di Cronbach (Tab. 2), che ha fatto emergere una forte affidabilità degli elementi utilizzati.

Infine, l'interesse per la politica, l'identificazione politica, il consumo di notizie, l'uso dei social media, l'uso dei social media per ragioni politiche, l'indice di antipolitica, l'indice di efficacia e l'indice di sfiducia sono stati utilizzati per costruire i modelli di regressione.

5. QUAL È IL LIVELLO DI FAMILIARITÀ DEI CITTADINI CON IL FENOMENO DELL'INCIVILTÀ POLITICA?

La presenza dell'inciviltà politica all'interno delle nostre democrazie è una consapevolezza condivisa dagli stessi cittadini, così come ha modo di emergere dalle risposte fornite dai nostri intervistati alla domanda “Lei ha mai sentito parlare di inciviltà politica?” che si distribuiscono tra le alternative “so di cosa si parla” (37,6%), “ne ho sentito parlare” (32,4%), “non ne ho idea” (30%). Circa due terzi degli intervistati si dichiara a conoscenza del fenomeno – sia pure con livelli di familiarità diversi – ponendosi in linea con coloro che, in sedi diverse, sollecitano l'attenzione dell'opinione pubblica in merito alla questione. Soltanto poco meno di un terzo degli intervistati manifesta una completa ignoranza del fenomeno.

Oltre a mostrare consapevolezza, gli intervistati hanno anche un'opinione ben precisa circa l'andamento temporale del fenomeno. Alla domanda “A suo avviso, l'inciviltà politica è aumentata o diminuita nel corso del tempo?”, il 43,3% dichiara che vi è stato un deciso aumento, il 27,2% segnala un aumento, il 19,9% individua una stabilità e il 9,6% indica un calo. Se si sommano le percentuali ottenute dalle modalità “un deciso aumento” e “un aumento” emerge che circa i due terzi degli intervistati condivide la preoccupazione circa la diffusione crescente dell'inciviltà politica. Tuttavia, la lettura congiunta dei dati fin qui presentati fa emergere un'evidente contradd-

Tabella 1. Items utilizzati per registrare la valutazione dell'inciviltà da parte dell'élite politica.

Indicatore	Dimensione	Valore medio
Alzare la voce, insultare Nel corso di un'assemblea di un Consiglio Regionale, due consiglieri in disaccordo tra loro su un provvedimento sul quale stavano per votare hanno alzato la voce e uno ha insultato l'altro	<i>Mancanza di rispetto per gli altri</i>	8,03 (2,11)
Criticare le posizioni dell'opposizione Nel difendere le proprie scelte, un esponente del governo ha criticato le posizioni dell'opposizione, definendole "follia ideologica"	<i>Item di controllo</i>	5 (2,63)
Interrompere e/o impedire agli altri di parlare Le facciamo ora vedere un frammento di un confronto avvenuto all'interno di un programma televisivo nel quale i due attori si interrompono l'un l'altro in continuazione, togliendo la parola o alzando la voce in modo da superare la voce dell'altro	<i>Mancanza di rispetto per gli altri</i>	7,99 (1,80)
Accusare di incapacità le forze di opposizione Un esponente politico ha dichiarato: "L'opposizione che abbiamo in questo paese non è in grado di fare proposte alternative a quelle del Governo"	<i>Item di controllo</i>	5,10 (2,63)
Usare un linguaggio volgare parlando di un avversario Una deputata, nel corso di un'intervista ha dichiarato, riferendosi a David Cameron (Ministro degli esteri inglese) con il quale dissentiva sulla politica estera, "Onestamente, lui mi può baciare il culo"	<i>Mancanza di rispetto per gli altri</i>	8,14 (1,98)
Inventare nomignoli o ridicolizzare Invito a valutare l'attribuzione di nomignoli usati per ridicolizzare altri attori politici	<i>Mancanza di rispetto per gli altri</i>	7,56 (2,02)
Demonizzare chi la pensa diversamente In una recente dichiarazione, Donald Trump (ex-Presidente degli Stati Uniti) ha dichiarato che l'attuale Amministrazione americana (guidata dal Presidente Joe Biden) è l'equivalente della Gestapo tedesca	<i>Mancanza di rispetto per i valori democratici</i>	7,31 (2,16)
Usare un linguaggio e/o comportarsi ispirandosi alla discriminazione sessuale, religiosa, etnica Nel corso di una campagna elettorale, un candidato ha pubblicato un post su Fb nel quale chiedeva il voto degli elettori con la promessa che se fosse stato eletto non avrebbero più visto mendicanti in giro	<i>Mancanza di rispetto per i valori democratici</i>	7,82 (2,18)
Stereotipizzare gruppi/minoranze associandoli a fenomeni pericolosi Nel corso di un'assemblea regionale, un consigliere è intervenuto accusando i transessuali di sputare sangue infetto	<i>Mancanza di rispetto per i valori democratici</i>	8,01 (2,11)
Mentire/inventare fatti per attaccare gli avversari Nel corso dell'ultima campagna elettorale per l'elezione del sindaco di Londra (che si ricandidava), i Conservatori hanno diffuso un video che mostrava scene di panico e violenza ambientate in una stazione della metropolitana. Le immagini della stazione della metro, però, erano ambientate a New York e non a Londra	<i>Mancanza di rispetto per i valori democratici</i>	7,62 (2,03)
Mancare di rispetto per simboli/eventi della storia nazionale Talvolta, si sente parlare di fatti ispirati a una diversa interpretazione di alcuni simboli e/o momenti della nostra storia nazionale	<i>Mancanza di rispetto per le istituzioni democratiche</i>	7,44 (2,10)
Minacciare di ricorrere alla violenza nei confronti di un avversario Mentre si stava svolgendo un'infuocata riunione del consiglio comunale, il sindaco ha minacciato di picchiare i consiglieri dell'opposizione	<i>Mancanza di rispetto per le istituzioni democratiche</i>	8,40 (2,02)
Invitare tutti alla collaborazione Un esponente politico ha pubblicato sul suo account X (prima Twitter) un invito alla collaborazione da parte di tutti	<i>Item di controllo</i>	5 (2,55)
Esortare alla violenza per contestare scelte o politiche non condivise Nel corso di una riunione di un partito francese, un suo esponente (eletto in Senato) ha esordito dicendo che provava un istinto omicida nei confronti del Presidente della Repubblica e ha invitato i suoi compagni di partito a condividere questo suo istinto	<i>Mancanza di rispetto per le istituzioni democratiche</i>	8,05 (2,00)
Comportarsi in modo inappropriato nei luoghi simboli della democrazia Risse e volgarità nelle aule parlamentari	<i>Mancanza di rispetto per le istituzioni democratiche</i>	8,40 (1,83)

dizione: il 46% di coloro che non ne hanno mai sentito parlare segnala un deciso aumento, con una percentuale superiore rispetto a chi sa di cosa si parla (44,4%) e di chi ne ha sentito parlare (39,5%). Insomma, pochi dubbi

circa il fatto che l'inciviltà politica, pure in presenza di una dichiarata ignoranza in merito alla sua natura, sia avvertita come un fenomeno in crescita. Ma cosa ci indica questa contraddizione e, soprattutto, su cosa si pog-

Tabella 2. Affidabilità degli indicatori della percezione dell'inciviltà (Alpha di Cronbach) (sui 12 items incivili).

	Cronbach's Alpha
Alzare la voce insultare altri soggetti	.902
Minacciare il ricorso alla violenza fisica	.897
Mettere in atto forme di discriminazione sessuale, religiosa, etnica-razziale	.897
Mancare di rispetto per simboli/eventi della storia nazionale	.902
Usare un linguaggio volgare parlando di un avversario politico	.894
Stereotipizzare gruppi/minoranze associandoli a fenomeni pericolosi	.896
Mentire/inventare fatti per attaccare gli avversari	.901
Inventare nomignoli o ridicolizzare gli avversari	.901
Demonizzare chi la pensa diversamente	.899
Esortare alla violenza per contestare scelte o politiche non condivise	.893
Comportarsi in modo inappropriato nei luoghi simbolo della democrazia	.892
Interrompere e/o impedire agli altri di parlare	.894

gia? Avere elementi utili al riguardo è di grande utilità in vista dell'analisi dei predittori dell'inciviltà politica. Infatti, se la consapevolezza della presenza dell'inciviltà politica appare così diffusa tra la popolazione, pure quando non si sa esattamente cosa sia, come cambia la percezione di episodi definibili come incivili?

Prima di affrontare tale questione, vale la pena prestare attenzione alle caratteristiche sociodemografiche degli intervistati, soprattutto di quelli che, pur non sapendo cosa sia, ne segnalano un netto incremento. Se la maggiore familiarità con il fenomeno è propria degli intervistati di sesso maschile (solo il 42% non ne ha mai sentito parlare vs il 58% delle donne), di mezza età o addirittura anziani (il 32,4% degli intervistati over 65 sa di cosa si parla contro il 17,3% dei giovani tra i 18 e i 30 anni), con un livello di istruzione medio o alto (il 45,7% degli intervistati con un diploma e il 45,2% in possesso di una laurea sanno di cosa si parla contro il 9% dei soggetti in possesso della licenza elementare o media), la valutazione circa il suo andamento – pur avendo dichiarato di non averne mai sentito parlare – appartiene tanto alle donne che agli uomini, così come non risente dell'età e del livello di istruzione. Risente, invece, e in maniera significativa dell'interesse per la politica: coloro che non hanno mai sentito parlare dell'inciviltà politica ma ne hanno segnalato un aumento provano disinteresse per la politica nel 51% dei casi, non seguono l'attualità politica (56%) e dichiarano di collocarsi “né a destra né a sinistra” nel 50,4% dei casi.

Tabella 3. Familiarità con il concetto e valutazione circa il suo andamento.

A suo avviso, l'inciviltà politica è aumentata o diminuita negli ultimi tempi?	Lei ha mai sentito parlare di inciviltà politica?			
	So di cosa si parla	Ne ho sentito parlare	Non ne ho idea	Totale
Un deciso aumento	44,4	39,5	46	43,3
Un aumento	26,3	27,2	28,3	27,2
Uguale al passato	24,5	21,3	12,7	19,9
Un calo	4,8	12	13,0	9,6
	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0
Totale	(376)	(324)	(300)	(1000)

Questi dati ci consentono di mettere a fuoco la contraddizione emersa e formulare una lettura al riguardo. Partendo dal fatto che i nostri intervistati non seguono l'attualità politica in conseguenza del loro disinteresse per l'argomento e, quindi, sono meno esposti a occasioni di incontro con episodi incivili, possiamo ipotizzare di essere in presenza di un'idea generale di politica che, a seguito della connotazione negativa che l'accompagna sempre più frequentemente, getta un'ombra su tutto ciò che la riguarda. In breve, sospettiamo che la condivisione di una cultura politica che considera la politica connotata negativamente, non abbia bisogno di elementi specifici di accusa per emettere una sentenza di condanna. In breve, che si abbia familiarità o meno con l'inciviltà politica poco importa; essa è, comunque, un tratto negativo associabile *tout court* alla politica. Quanto tale sentimento – riconducibile a un orientamento antipolitico – possa influenzare la percezione dell'inciviltà delle élite politiche è quanto vedremo nelle prossime pagine. Per ora, i dati presentati ci consentono di sostenere che, per alcuni soggetti, vi è una sovrapposizione semantica tra politica e inciviltà, offrendo ulteriori elementi di sostegno a quanto emerso in altri studi (Bentivegna & Rega, 2026).

6. I PREDITTORI DELL'INCIVILTÀ POLITICA

La valutazione dei singoli items su una scala da 1 a 10 da parte degli intervistati ha fatto emergere un valore medio dell'inciviltà pari a 7,89, con punte superiori al valore di 8 nei seguenti casi: risse nelle aule parlamentari (8,40), minaccia di violenza nei confronti di avversari politici (8,40), uso di un linguaggio volgare (8,14), esortazione alla violenza per contestare scelte politiche non condivise (8,05), alzare la voce e/o insultare i propri col-

leggi (8,03), stereotipizzare le minoranze (8,01). Come si evince dalla lettura, siamo in presenza di esempi riconducibili tanto alla mancanza di rispetto per gli altri che per i valori e le istituzioni democratiche. La natura trasversale degli items che hanno ottenuto i punteggi più elevati indica la solidità dell’approccio che sostiene la multidimensionalità del concetto di inciviltà politica (Bentivegna & Rega, 2024a, 2024b; Stryker et al., 2016, 2024), che tiene insieme indicatori riconducibili sia al “personal level” che al “public level” per usare l’articolazione suggerita da Muddiman (2017).

Passando ora ad analizzare il modello di regressione costruito per individuare il ruolo dei predittori, abbiamo modo di testare la validità delle nostre ipotesi che, in realtà, ricevono solo parziali conferme sulle quali è necessario soffermarsi. In particolare, la prima ipotesi – che prevedeva una valutazione più blanda delle espressioni di inciviltà degli attori politici da parte dei cittadini con orientamento antipolitico più marcato – viene nettamente smentita dai dati: l’indice di antipolitica non entra nel modello (collocandosi in prima posizione tra le variabili escluse), indicando che questa visione politi-

ca non contribuisce in modo significativo a spiegare la variabilità nella valutazione dell’inciviltà politica, una volta considerati gli altri predittori.

Di altro segno, invece, i contributi dell’indice di fiducia nella democrazia e di efficacia politica. In questi casi, infatti, la nostra ipotesi viene confermata, facendo emergere un nesso positivo tra il maggiore livello di fiducia nella democrazia e il senso di efficacia politica e la valutazione di espressioni incivili. Questi dati relativi alla dimensione politica ci offrono interessanti spunti di riflessione, che vanno oltre la valutazione dell’inciviltà politica e si legano, invece, all’idea di politica intrattenuta dai cittadini.

La marginalità degli indicatori utilizzati per misurare l’indice di antipolitica (“i politici parlano tanto ma fanno poco”, “l’Italia sarebbe governata meglio se le decisioni importanti fossero prese dai cittadini invece che dai politici” e “fare compromessi significa svendere i propri principi”) potrebbe essere ricondotta a un giudizio complessivamente negativo da parte dei cittadini nei confronti dei rappresentanti politici e del loro modo di fare politica. Certamente si tratta di un giudizio sul qua-

Tabella 4. Risultati del modello di regressione per la previsione della percezione dell’inciviltà politica¹.

Modello	Coefficienti non standardizzati		Coefficienti standardizzati	t	Sig.
	B	Deviazione Standard Errore	β		
(Costante)	.406	.073		5,577	,000
Istruzione: livello alto	.206	.055	,101	3,731	,000
Autocollocazione politica: sinistra	.244	.058	,118	4,212	,000
Consumi medial: news avoiders	-,222	.057	-,108	-3,893	,000
Non utilizzatori dei social media	.237	.064	,105	3,714	,000
Uso dei Social media users per ragioni politiche	.537	.059	-,263	-9,139	,000
Indice di efficacia	.116	.035	,090	3,276	,000
Indice di fiducia nella democrazia	.326	.038	,255	8,640	,000

R 0,54; R² 0,30; R² adattato 0,29; Errore standard della stima 0,83971.

È stata effettuata, nello specifico, una regressione lineare per blocchi – utilizzando il software SPSS – ovvero una tecnica statistica che permette di analizzare la relazione tra una variabile dipendente e più variabili indipendenti, raggruppando queste ultime in blocchi e applicando metodi di inserimento o rimozione diversi a ciascun blocco. Nello specifico, abbiamo utilizzato il metodo di rimozione (backward) per ciascun blocco. Le variabili indipendenti usate per la regressione sono state codificate come spiegato nel paragrafo 4 - Dati e metodologia: il livello di istruzione (codificato come alto, medio e basso); l’interesse per la politica (categorizzato come basso, medio e alto); l’autocollocazione politica (categorizzata come centro, sinistra, destra o nessuna); i consumi medial che hanno fatto emergere – tramite una cluster analysis – la presenza di quattro principali profili: news avoiders, news traditionalists, news encounters e news seekers; l’uso dei social media in generale e per ragioni politiche in particolare che, in considerazione del diverso livello di engagement proprio di ogni item (pari a 0 nel caso della lettura di contenuti, 1 pubblicare una reaction, 2 condividere, commentare o pubblicare contenuti), ha portato alla costruzione di un indice che varia da 0 a 2; l’indice di orientamento antipolitico che fa riferimento a tre indicatori (l’Italia sarebbe governata meglio se le decisioni importanti fossero prese dai cittadini invece che dai politici eletti, fare compromessi in politica significa svendere i propri principi, i politici parlano tanto ma fanno poco); l’indice di efficacia politica, misurato mediante due items (le persone come me non hanno alcuna influenza su ciò che fa il governo e a volte la politica è così complicata che non riesco a capire ciò di cui si sta discutendo) e l’indice di fiducia nella democrazia misurato mediante due items (la democrazia è comunque preferibile a qualsiasi altra forma di governo e un leader forte alla guida del governo farebbe bene all’Italia anche se non rispettasse le regole democratiche). Nella Tabella 4 sono riportate soltanto le variabili che sono state automaticamente incluse dal programma nel modello di regressione mentre non sono riportate quelle escluse.

le si fonda la visione antipolitica, ma esso non coincide necessariamente con l'accettazione di uno stile comunicativo aggressivo e volgare spesso associato ad alcune forme di contestazione dell'élite politica o all'adozione delle cosiddette "bad manners". È possibile, tuttavia, che l'orientamento antipolitico influenzi la valutazione dell'inciviltà politica in modo indiretto, attraverso altre variabili. Ad esempio, i sentimenti antipolitici potrebbero essere correlati a fattori socio-demografici (età e genere in particolare), psicologici, politici o legati a specifici consumi mediali, che a loro volta potrebbero influenzare la percezione dell'inciviltà. In questo caso, l'effetto dell'indice di antipolitica sarebbe mediato da altre variabili e non apparirebbe come un predittore diretto nel modello. In breve, considerare i politici come chiacchieroni e inconcludenti o ritenere preferibile ricorrere alla valutazione dei cittadini nel caso di decisioni di particolare rilevanza non comporta di per sé né l'accettazione né il rifiuto di espressioni incivili da parte delle élite politiche. Appare chiaro, dunque, che le nostre ipotesi di lavoro sono solo parzialmente confermate: i cittadini che condividono un atteggiamento antipolitico non percepiscono l'inciviltà dell'élite politica in maniera meno spiccata di coloro che non lo condividono, mentre coloro che nutrono sentimenti di fiducia nei confronti della democrazia e provano un senso di efficacia politica sono più sensibili nei confronti del fenomeno.

Se sulla complessa relazione tra attitudini politiche, fiducia nelle istituzioni e percezione dell'inciviltà torneremo in sede di discussione, procedendo ora a esaminare le altre ipotesi di lavoro, è interessante notare come un basso livello di consumo informativo si configuri come un predittore di minore sensibilità nei confronti di espressioni incivili. Ciò significa che la nostra ipotesi (H3) circa un effetto di *densitization* nei confronti del fenomeno da parte degli individui a seguito di elevati livelli consumi informativi viene smentita mentre emerge un nesso tra accettazione dell'inciviltà e bassi consumi informativi. In altre parole, mentre l'ipotesi H3 suggeriva che un'elevata esposizione a informazioni politiche avrebbe potuto "anestetizzare" gli individui di fronte all'inciviltà riducendone la sensibilità, i nostri risultati indicano un effetto differente. Ovvero, sono coloro che hanno un basso consumo informativo (*news-avoiders*) a percepire meno nettamente le forme di inciviltà presenti nei comportamenti degli attori politici. Ciò può spiegarsi in relazione allo scarso interesse per la politica da parte di questi soggetti: coloro che sono disinteressati alle vicende politiche e, quindi, fanno anche uno scarso consumo di informazioni, tendono a essere meno attenti e reattivi di fronte a espressioni incivili provenienti dal mondo politico. L'estraneità nei confronti delle vicende politiche si riflette, in questo caso,

nell'indifferenza di fronte a forme ed espressioni incivili provenienti da quello stesso mondo.

Viceversa, il fatto di non utilizzare i social media, ovvero di non frequentare un ambiente in cui forme ed espressioni di inciviltà sono molto presenti al punto da essere state "normalizzate", si configura come un predittore di maggiore sensibilità rispetto all'inciviltà politica, confermando la validità della nostra H5. Restrungendo l'uso dei social media a finalità di natura politica, si conferma anche la H6, che sosteneva come tale utilizzo potesse modificare la percezione dell'inciviltà, rendendola più "accettabile". Questo risultato rappresenta un'ulteriore conferma di quanto emerso già in precedenti ricerche circa il forte contributo alla "normalizzazione" dell'inciviltà offerto dall'uso dei social media per attività politiche, un dato che appare del tutto coerente con le informazioni disponibili sul clima delle discussioni che si sviluppano negli ambienti digitali e in quelli social in particolare (Bentivegna et al., 2024).

Altrettanto coerenti con la letteratura risultano i nessi con il livello di istruzione e l'autocollocazione politica. Per quanto riguarda la prima variabile, la maggior parte delle ricerche condotte ha evidenziato come un elevato livello di istruzione sia associato a una maggiore sensibilità rispetto al fenomeno dell'inciviltà. Analogamente, la collocazione a sinistra si lega a una maggiore attenzione per la questione. Questa maggiore sensibilità da parte degli elettori di sinistra si pone come una conferma rispetto a precedenti ricerche condotte in Italia (Bentivegna et al., 2024) e, al contempo, si allinea con quanto emerso dagli studi di Muddiman (2017), Kenski et al. (2020) e Oh et al. (2021), che segnalavano significative differenze nella percezione dell'inciviltà tra soggetti con posizioni progressiste e di sinistra rispetto a quelli con posizioni conservatrici e di destra.

6. DISCUSSIONE E CONCLUSIONI

La ricerca sui predittori della percezione dell'inciviltà politica da parte dei cittadini ha prodotto risultati spesso contraddittori, rendendo difficile una lettura univoca del fenomeno. Ad eccezione dei dati socio-demografici, che mostrano generalmente tendenze più coerenti (Bentivegna et al., 2024; Conway & Stryker, 2021; Kenski et al., 2020), il ruolo delle altre variabili cambia significativamente in base al contesto e al periodo esaminati. In particolare, il ruolo dei fattori legati al rapporto tra cittadini e politica, come fiducia nelle istituzioni, efficacia politica e atteggiamenti antipolitici, è stato raramente indagato, evidenziando la necessità di ulteriori approfondimenti.

Con l'intento di colmare questo gap, il presente studio ha inteso esaminare l'impatto di questi predittori sulla percezione dell'inciviltà politica. I risultati offrono un quadro articolato delle variabili che influenzano la valutazione dei comportamenti degli attori politici da parte dei cittadini, con risultati in parte inattesi e che richiedono una riflessione e discussione critica.

L'analisi, condotta su un campione rappresentativo della popolazione italiana, ha evidenziato in primo luogo come la fiducia nelle istituzioni democratiche e il senso di efficacia politica siano entrambi associati positivamente a una maggiore sensibilità verso le espressioni incivili delle élite politiche. Detto più esplicitamente, i cittadini che nutrono sentimenti di fiducia nella democrazia e ritengono di poter incidere sul processo politico tendono a percepire con più chiarezza i comportamenti irrispettosi e lesivi delle regole del confronto democratico (ad esempio, calunnie, attacchi personali, stereotipizzazione negativa, etc.), valutandoli più seriamente e gravemente. Ciò sembra indicare che il rafforzamento di tali atteggiamenti tra i cittadini potrebbe favorire una più ampia consapevolezza dell'importanza del rispetto reciproco nella sfera pubblica, contrastando la tendenza alla diffusione e "normalizzazione" dei comportamenti incivili da parte delle élite politiche.

Sulla base dell'ostilità diffusa verso le istituzioni politiche formali e la retorica anti-establishment condivisi dai tanti soggetti accomunati da posizioni antipolitiche (Mete, 2022a), avevamo ipotizzato che tali orientamenti potessero influenzare la percezione dell'inciviltà politica, portando a una valutazione più blanda dei comportamenti incivili della classe politica. Tuttavia, contrariamente alle nostre aspettative, gli atteggiamenti antipolitici non si sono rivelati predittori significativi nel nostro studio. Questa variabile non ha raggiunto i criteri di significatività statistica necessari per essere inclusa nel modello di regressione finale, suggerendo l'assenza di un effetto diretto nel contesto italiano contemporaneo. Diverse spiegazioni possono essere avanzate per chiarire questo risultato.

Innanzitutto, il fenomeno potrebbe essere connesso alla crescente sfiducia verso i partiti e i rappresentanti politici che caratterizza l'opinione pubblica italiana. Dati empirici recenti evidenziano livelli particolarmente elevati di sfiducia nei partiti (Brunkert, Puranen, Turska-Kawa, & Welzel, 2023) e di insoddisfazione per il funzionamento della democrazia (Wike & Fetterolf, 2024), accompagnati da un indice di antipolitica che in Italia raggiunge valori significativamente superiori rispetto ad altri contesti nazionali (Mete, 2022b). In uno scenario così caratterizzato, dove la disaffezione politica appare diffusa e generalizzata, i sentimenti antipolitici sem-

brano aver subito un processo di penetrazione socio-culturale, configurandosi come un fenomeno trasversale piuttosto che come caratteristica distintiva di specifici segmenti della popolazione (Bentivegna & Rega, 2026). Di conseguenza, poiché la diffidenza verso la classe politica risulta ampiamente condivisa anche tra cittadini con diversi orientamenti ideologici, gli atteggiamenti antipolitici perdono la loro capacità predittiva rispetto alla valutazione delle espressioni incivili politica.

In secondo luogo, nel contesto politico contemporaneo si è anche assistito a una parziale sovrapposizione dei repertori comunicativi tra attori politici tradizionali e attori "antisistema". I rappresentanti dei partiti tradizionali hanno progressivamente incorporato nel loro linguaggio elementi comunicativi aggressivi e incivili – tipicamente caratteristici di una retorica anti-establishment, viscerale ed emotiva – con l'obiettivo di accrescere popolarità e consensi elettorali. Questa convergenza comunicativa potrebbe spiegare i risultati inattesi riguardo al ruolo degli orientamenti antipolitici, poiché i cittadini risultano esposti a simili elementi di inciviltà indipendentemente dalle loro personali inclinazioni politiche, rendendo così meno evidente la relazione tra posizioni antipolitiche e accettazione dell'inciviltà.

Sempre in relazione al contesto, il risultato è in parte riconducibile al forte parallelismo politico che caratterizza storicamente il sistema mediale italiano, con i media che si allineano ai partiti politici e ne riflettono le divisioni ideologiche. In questo panorama, giornalisti e testate – specialmente quelle più schierate politicamente, ma non solo – funzionano come vettori e amplificatori dell'inciviltà politica (Bentivegna & Stanziano 2024; Rega & Corolini, 2024), esponendo trasversalmente i cittadini a contenuti incivili, indipendentemente dalle loro specifiche attitudini politiche. Tale meccanismo di diffusione mediata dell'inciviltà potrebbe ulteriormente contribuire a spiegare la mancata correlazione significativa tra orientamenti antipolitici e percezione dell'inciviltà.

Passando ora a esaminare gli altri risultati emersi dallo studio, vale la pena soffermarsi sul ruolo dei consumi mediali e sull'uso dei social media per finalità politiche. I dati raccolti mostrano che due categorie di individui percepiscono meno facilmente l'inciviltà dei comportamenti della classe politica: coloro che si tengono lontani dalle fonti informative tradizionali (i cosiddetti "news-avoiders") e coloro che usano spesso i social media per motivazioni politiche. Al contrario, il forte consumo di notizie attraverso i media mainstream non sembra avere un effetto significativo sulla percezione dell'inciviltà. In sostanza, sia chi si sottrae all'informazione, probabilmente per disinteresse verso la politica, sia chi la segue principalmente attraverso i social media,

esponendosi perciò a contenuti politici non “mediati” da professionisti, spesso polarizzati e incivili – dato confermato da un’ampia letteratura (Anderson & Huntington, 2017; Oz, Zheng & Chen, 2018; Phillips & Milner, 2017) – sembrano “desensibilizzati” alle manifestazioni di inciviltà politica. Tali modalità di consumo mediale, come evidenziato da precedenti studi (Bentivegna & Rega, 2024a), possono perciò contribuire a rendere i cittadini meno sensibili e reattivi di fronte a comportamenti irrispettosi e lesivi delle regole del confronto democratico.

L’ultimo predittore considerato, non in ordine di importanza, riguarda l’autocollocazione politica degli intervistati che conferma una maggiore sensibilità per l’inciviltà da parte degli elettori di sinistra, generalmente più inclini a stigmatizzare i comportamenti incivili della classe politica. Questo risultato si allinea con precedenti evidenze empiriche ottenute sia in contesto italiano (Bentivegna et al., 2024) che internazionale (Muddiman, 2017; Kenski et al., 2020; Oh et al., 2021), suggerendo l’esistenza di una “sensibilità ideologica” che rende gli elettori progressisti più attenti a sanzionare le violazioni delle norme di civiltà e rispetto reciproco.

Diversi sono i limiti che caratterizzano questo studio, a cominciare dal fatto che l’analisi si basa su dati puntuali che non consentono di stabilire nessi causali tra le variabili. Ricerche longitudinali potrebbero chiarire meglio la direzione delle relazioni osservate, ma purtroppo non vi sono dati disponibili. Inoltre, la ricerca si concentra solo sul contesto italiano, caratterizzato da specificità che potrebbero influenzare i risultati. Infine, la percezione dell’inciviltà è stata misurata attraverso un numero limitato di indicatori e in futuro potrebbe essere utile ampliare la gamma dei comportamenti esaminati, includendo ulteriori dimensioni dell’inciviltà.

Al di là di questi limiti, questo lavoro offre un contributo originale al dibattito sull’inciviltà politica, evidenziando il ruolo che hanno sulla percezione del fenomeno sia il rapporto dei cittadini con la politica sia quello con il sistema dei media. Ricerche future dovranno esaminare ulteriormente le interazioni tra attitudini politiche, consumi mediali e percezioni di inciviltà in chiave comparata, sviluppando strumenti innovativi per cogliere le diverse sfaccettature del fenomeno e le sue implicazioni per il funzionamento dei sistemi democratici.

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CRITICAL DEBATE



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The nostalgia of the mass party

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Abstract. Why are political parties on the defendant's bench? What do people want from parties today? Is there any chance of recapturing citizens' hearts and minds? This paper addresses questions linked to the crisis of confidence in parties in western European countries. After surveying some hypotheses on the origin of the discontent, the paper suggests that parties are trapped by an untenable pledge derived from their original connotation. The pledge concerns intra-party workings more than party activity in the political system. The paper sustains that although extensive criticism of parties is justified, they show some resilience. People still expect party profile and behaviour to be as they were in the post-war golden age, though recent transformations have downplayed many features that characterized the popular model of democracy. Nostalgia for past party politics clashes with present party reality and further depresses public esteem of political parties.

Keywords: mass party, nostalgia, disaffection, retrotopia.

INTRODUCTION

The 'golden age' that political parties enjoyed in the post-war years (Katz and Mair, 1995, 2018) had waned by the late 20th century, with a collapse in confidence and trust. This paper addresses a series of questions linked to this situation: Why are parties so poorly considered? What aspects of party profile have changed? What is missing that people still expect from parties? A path of investigation not followed by most studies suggests that people expect the "impossible" of parties. Public opinion at large requires and even longs for an (idealized) party whose crucial features recall the mass party: a party with a collective imprint used to achieve collective goods through collective means of action. This is the profile of the mass party of the golden post-war age. In western European democracies people feel nostalgia for certain past party politics and features. Nostalgia is a sentiment evoking something which has waned, but is regarded with emotion and affection. The conundrum facing parties today lies in the contrast between what people would like from them on one hand, and what parties are nowadays, on the other hand.

THE ROOTS OF DISCONTENT

The negative reception of parties today has many sources. Some are *ontological*, linked to the party itself, its essence; others spring from the party's behaviour. The first strand of antiparty sentiment reveals the persistence of that thread of hostility and disdain that has accompanied the idea of division and partition – and thus of *party* – throughout the centuries (Rosenblum, 2008; Ignazi, 2017; Skjösberg, 2021). Today, however, rejection of the party *per se* does not emerge in a direct open way. Public invocation of a non-party system is very limited. Even the populist parties, which have recently been stoking anti-politics and anti-party sentiment, in the end follow the lines of party politics (Müller, 2017).

The second strand of anti-party sentiment, rather than dismissing the party as such, takes the form of profound, all-encompassing contempt, derived from supposed misconduct by parties. At the core of this sentiment is the idea that parties do not live up to people's expectations: namely, fair representation of their demands, effective capacity to produce the expected outputs, and open, bottom-up, democratic internal party procedures by dedicated, decent, honest politicians. These two sources of disaffection (ontological and structural/behavioural) are often intertwined, and reinforce each other. Although the first source is underlying, rather than having broad and open support, it provides the basis for the development of the much more vocal second source.

An attempt to delve into the present negative reception of political parties could start from the rationale for party formation. Beyond the motivations and expectations advanced by political entrepreneurs, the requests to parties by the people when they entered the political arena¹ had at their core the promise of perfect, absolute, flawless democracy (Janse and te Velde, 2017). Since their inception political parties present an ideal of free and equal participation both internally, regarding intra-party dynamics, and externally, regarding the political system. The centrality of democratic procedures and behaviour was such that the first meetings of historical mass parties (the German Sdap, the Dutch Arp and the

British Liberal Federation) ranged for most of the time discussing, together with the means for opening up the political system to the religiously and socially marginalized constituencies, the most equal and democratic internal *modus operandi* (Heyer, 2022). In sum, a close relationship between party and democracy has existed since the beginning (Corduwener, 2021; Ignazi, 2017; Mair, 2003; Webb et al., 2022).

Political parties have not responded with the same efficacy and satisfaction to aspirations for freedom and equality at system level and at intra-party level. At system level, parties may show a positive record. As they were the indispensable tools for setting up a representative democratic system, they delivered what was demanded of them. Indeed, they exerted continuous pressure on established elites to broaden civil and political rights (Daalder, 1966). More than that, at its 1891 congress, the Spd explicitly embodied the aim of '*universal, harmonious perfection*' through the emancipation of workers (Byrne, 2021; emphasis added).

Much of the consideration and legitimacy parties gained in the early 20th century came from their purported struggle to acquire power for the 'inarticulate masses' (Rokkan, 1970). Isolated advocates of full political rights for everybody in the legislative assemblies, were coupled and supported by partisan mass mobilization in the society, to break the ceiling of parties' negative reception. In a way, "street politics and parliamentary politics came to depend on each other", as argued by Charles Tilly (2004: 44). And the instrument to fulfil liberalization and democratization of the system was the political party, sometimes in symbiosis with the trade union as in Great Britain and Scandinavia (Bartolini 2000). In addition to real politics came the theoretical legitimation, especially by Max Weber ([1919] 1994) and Hans Kelsen ([1929] 2013) which both rejected the last attempts by the liberal elites to dampen the party ascendancy – an attempt voiced particularly by Mosei Ostrogorski ([1902] 1970). At last, a collective body arisen from society rather than from parliament, got the right to inspire parliamentary activity and finally control government. Representation had moved from individual to collective, and the party had become the indispensable tool to grant representation.

Therefore, the famous Schattschneider's dictum, "democracy is unthinkable, save in terms of parties" (1942: 2), was – and still is – well grounded. In fact, beyond all the criticism addressed to parties in recent times, very minor constituencies would write off of parties as such. Rather, further elements for channelling the demands of citizens have emerged *in support, not instead*, of parties, ranging from direct democracy rep-

¹ Susan Stokes argues that in order to investigate on the origins of political parties, and especially 'the conditions under which either elite politics or popular mobilization will engender political parties, we need better, more social-scientifically informed historical research into the origins of parties' (1999: 246). We fully endorse this suggestion, but this is not the place for a detailed description of the development of European political parties. It suffices here to refer to the classics, from Stein Rokkan to Hans Daalder, or to some recent historic overview (see te Velde and Janse, 2017).

ertories to deliberative mechanisms. Although parties are held in low esteem and consideration, still there is no other game in town.

The most critical point therefore concerns not so much their role in the democratic system, as their internal features and working. The present dissatisfaction is grounded less on their performance in term of policy outputs, rather on their practices: not what they do, rather how they do it. Moreover, the criticism addressed to parties should be regarded with respect to people's expectations of parties and politicians' behaviour.

Therefore, is the party's early, primordial, self-image of an hyper-democratic organization still present in the public opinion today? Are the collective and participatory traits of the organization (through involvement of members, mobilization of activists and middle-level elites, and through total commitment of party elites), still the main reference for a large part of citizens when they think of parties? Or have people accepted and interiorized parties as a mere *locus* for individual competition devoted to the conquest of party-controlled assets, such as political careers, and of party-controlled resources in the labour market, the public administration, the state, the economy, and so on? Differently said, have people endorsed a Schumpeterian electoral democracy or a popular democracy model? We would argue that the resilience of a popular democracy is supported by the persistence of a positive image of the party in its golden age.

BETWEEN POPULAR AND ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY

As forecasted by Kirchheimer (1966) and later advanced by Katz and Mair (1995, 2018), since the late 20th century, parties have taken a path that makes them diverge from their original imprint, identified by Duverger's mass party model. Indeed, divergence from the mass party model did not alter their formal structure, save for some delegation procedures (Webb et al., 2017; Poguntke and Scarrow, 2020; Masi and Pizzimenti, 2022). The change involved discarding a series of connotating functions and departing from their original imprint as a participatory collective organization. Their leaning towards other organizational models (cartel, franchise, electoral-efficient, to quote the most common), implied a change in the party essence, because it emphasised individual, office seeking, and competitive features, whereas the party was originally conceived as a *collective enterprise* devoted to achieving *collective goals* through *collective activities* of various sorts.

This shift from collective to individual has been somehow inevitable. According to a political-sociological

approach akin to the 'environmentally induced change' approach of Harmel and Janda (1994), the recent changes that have invested political parties may be conceived as a by-product of the new social environment. Parties appeared on the political stage at a time when industrial society was burgeoning. From that setting they acquired many rational-bureaucratic elements, such as the vertical line of 'political production', differentiation and specialization of tasks, uniform standardized behaviour, and formalization of internal procedures. Indeed, the mass party was an "organizational invention" (Duverger 1951) in tune with the industrial era. Nothing of the kind had been known before, with the eventual exception of the Jacobin Clubs in revolutionary France (Kennedy, 1982, 1988, 2000).

The advent of the post-industrial and post-modern society brought about a change in such setting. In line with the new environment and its implicit *Weltanschauung*, parties abandoned the traditional functions of representation and channelling, on which rested their *input role* to decision-makers, and instead favoured an *output role* in terms of efficient, problem-solver, public agency. They pointed to manage citizens' demands and government outputs, by depoliticizing the political arena, and by relying on independent authorities, supranational organizations, technical expertise, and so on. As a consequence, recalling the well-known interpretation of Katz and Mair (1995), parties no longer cared about the bridge between society and the state that they had been cultivating since the dawn of the 20th century.

As argued by Peter Mair (2013) parties went on to consider themselves self-sufficient, operating as agents of the state devoted to running elections, and not much more: the fortunate image of 'parties as public utilities' (van Biezen, 2004) well captures this point. This activity enables parties to maintain a central role in the political system. Once in office, they have to concentrate on producing effective policies, more or less in line with the demands of the public; if in opposition, they have to offer palatable alternatives. A minimum of responsiveness is sufficient.

This evolution is congruent with performing the crucial function of 'structuring the vote', the ultimate and exclusive function of parties. In fact, if we accept the (Schumpeterian) vision of free and fair competition between elites as a minimum definition of democracy, parties could be confined to that role. However, the idea of parties mainly or even exclusively devoted to intra- and inter-party competition for the conquest of internal offices and seats in assemblies – electoral democracy – runs counter to the interpretation of the role of parties in the democratic system embraced by popular democracy (Mair, 2013; Urbinati, 2014).

On the one hand, the electoral conception of democracy ‘make[s] citizen participation during the period between elections superfluous, and in this sense make[s] democracy an accessory to representative government [...] [r]epresentative democracy is not a “consenting crowd of inorganic voters” [...] as it is a type of government that starts with elections but develops beyond them’ (Urbinati, 2011: 27). On the other hand, popular democracy entails active participation of citizens in the public sphere, mainly through political parties.

Popular democracy, more than electoral democracy, implies a central role of political parties. The conundrum is that this kind of democracy is threatened and enfeebled by the poor consideration of parties. The negative rate of parties is assessed by a large swathe of empirical analysis. However, it may be argued that the public in general maintains a certain reservoir of confidence in the parties. People do not seem to have given up the idea of a possible recovery. Residual confidence persists for one reason or another.

PARTY RESILIENCE

As already advanced, in the first post-war years, driven by comparison with the previous inter-war era of totalitarianism, parties received immense credit for accomplishing their essential promise: *to bring democracy to the party system through their own democratic organization*. In the long run, however, they were unable to do so, and this led to growing disillusionment. The general decline in identification with, and attachment to parties, validated by many case-studies and cross-national research (i.e., Dalton, 2011, 2018; Garzia et al., 2022; EES, 2022), provides a more convincing indicator of public disaffection than turnout or membership rate (Scarrow et al., 2017).

This sentiment does not stem from a rational evaluation by voters of party performance in delivering its policies and promises. As Russell Dalton (2020) asserted on the basis of recent psychological contributions, “Human action is guided not by a thoughtful, deliberative calculus of costs and benefits, but by intuitions and feelings developed from previous experience, emotions, moral values, and personal traits.” We can therefore argue that disaffection is not a question of party effectiveness or competence but rather is nurtured by more emotional factors (Achen and Bartels, 2016). In particular, it points to a lack of understanding of people’s demands, indifference to the concerns of normal citizens, the inaccessibility of politicians, and finally to their low moral rectitude and honesty (Clarke et al., 2018; Hay, 2007; Stoker,

2019). Anger and even fury against parties (and politicians) erupt *because of betrayed expectations*.

Empirical support for the above scenario comes from a recent international survey by Ipsos (2023). In almost all the European countries considered, a range between 60 and 65% of people agreed with the statement ‘traditional parties and politicians don’t care about people like me’; exceptions were Germany (49%), the Netherlands (45%) and Sweden (44%). This feeling of being disregarded and ignored by parties and their representatives, coupled with a feeling of solitude due to lax or severed organizational bonds, is what fuels disillusionment and creates distrust of parties.

This well-known picture should however be completed by mentioning some counterfactual evidences which nuance the asserted dark picture on party’s fate.

First, parties do not disappear from the stage: they are still at the centre of the process of delegation, and party governmentness still holds, except in a few cases, in particular Italy, which had a series of technical non-partisan cabinets.

Second, in some countries, people continue to join parties (van Haute and Ribeiro, 2022; Bale, Webb and Poletti, 2020) and even actively participate, as in Norway (Heidar and Jupskås, 2023) and to a different extent Great Britain (Poletti, Webb and Bale, 2019; Barnfield and Bale, 2022).

Third, the general sentiment of dislike may find some qualification. In her research on the British parties, Dommet (2020) has in fact shown that not all parties are despised to the same degree: when the interviewee is confronted with an evaluation of her/his preferred party, the general negative statement ‘all parties are bad’ shifts to ‘all parties but mine are bad’. This implies that rejection is selective. If all mass surveys offered this alternative, the overall rate of discontent would probably be different.

Fourth, and most important, new parties continue to emerge. Brand new parties, according to Chiaramonte and Emanuele (2017) and Emanuele and Sikk (2021) – who use the stringent criteria of Bartolini and Mair (1990) to identify new parties – increased to 30 parties in the 2010s, and 22.6% of them obtained more than 5% of the vote, a much higher percentage than in previous decades (Emanuele and Sikk, (2021).

Fifth, in addition to parties which got representation in the national assemblies, also the number of party lists and candidates which competed in recent elections increased.² In the United Kingdom, candidates have been constantly more than 3300 for 650 constituencies, although they are declining from the high of 4130 in

² Data was retrieved from the official websites of the Ministries of the Interior and National Parliaments of the different countries.

2010. In Germany, 47 parties were authorised to compete by the Ministry of the Interior. In the 2022 elections in France, the 40 lists fielded 6239 candidates, slightly less than in 2017, when the traditional party system broke down. In Italy the party lists authorised to compete numbered 101 in 2022 and 103 in 2018. If we also consider subnational level, we find a burgeoning of local lists in many countries (Reiser and Holtmann, 2008; Lefebvre, 2020; Tavares, Raudla and Silva, 2020); whether or not they are set up outside or even against national political parties, they nonetheless express a willingness to organize in order to compete in the political arena.

This evidence suggests that although harshly criticized, political parties are not by any means disappearing: first, they remain at the centre of the chain of delegation without any alternative, since any other possibility (such as referenda, deliberative polls, sortition, recall) is conceived as supplementary not substitutive of parties; and second, people still invest in them maybe because nothing else or better is available.

This resilience leads to think that people do not discard parties as such: rather they dislike the present offer – even if, as we have seen, they continue to join them to a certain extent. It could be argued that people would envision to recapture the party's original role as an instrument of involvement, participation and socialization. In this way the party could reinstate its ability to channel demands, represent interests and values, deliver adequate policies, and respond to the people in an empathic way. Whether or not these aspirations are realistic or merely idealized, if voters did not entertain them, no new parties would have emerged in recent years, and no populist surge advocating 'better politics' (Müller, 2017) would have occurred. The demand for good parties and good politicians remains (Clarke et al., 2018).

NOSTALGIA FOR (AN IDEALIZED) MASS PARTY

One plausible answer leads back to the image of the political party held by public opinion. That image was highly positive for a long time because parties were considered inseparable from democracy. This windfall was derived from the role played by political parties at two critical moments in the process of democratization: in the 1920s when universal (male) suffrage was introduced all over Europe, and in the post-war period when parties were the cornerstone of democracy, particularly in France, Germany and Italy. Germany developed as a *Parteiinstaat* (Poguntke, 1994) and Konrad Adenauer asserted that 'all political activities should go through the parties' (Corduwener, 2020: 56). Italy somewhat

reinstated Fascist party interpenetration of the state and society by using the same approach in the new multiparty system (Morlino, 1998); pointedly, Palmiro Togliatti, leader of the Communist party, stated that parties 'are democracy that self-organizes'. France too re-installed parties at the centre of the Fourth Republic (Avril 1986) despite General De Gaulle's disdain for them (Berstein, 2001: 100, 1998: 820). The point is that the kind of party at centre stage in the years of the golden era was the mass party. *Public opinion came to identify parties with the features of the mass party.*

In addition, after WWII, 'the institutional entanglement between parties and the state' (Corduwener, 2020:59) was settled by the constitutional and legal regulation of parties. Limited in the first post-war years to countries which had experienced long (Italy), medium (Germany) and short (Austria) totalitarian experiences, this process later spread all over Europe, with very few exceptions (van Biezen and Borz, 2012). All these legal provisions at least implicitly require a *collective body* where decisions are taken by a formal bottom-up procedure that strengthens the image of the party as a *collective arena*. This aspect spills over to party activity: the party has to advance the claim to represent the 'common good' and 'general will', even when it pursues sectorial and micro interests. Any party, including single-issue party, fosters its proposals by referring to more general encompassing goals. The pressure for collective goals inherent to democratic representation (and to some extent responsibility) is coupled with the *associational nature* of the party (Dommet, 2020), which in turn implies a collective environment.

Political parties are therefore pressured from two sides to abide by their founding organizational imperative on collective arrangements. On one side, the formal-legal frame has recently become more and more stringent; on the other, the aura of post-war party politics, populated by massive organizations streaked with militancy and open-field mobilization, forged a strong image of what a party should be in the public opinion.

The 'logic of appropriateness' (March and Olsen, 2008)³ of the political party is therefore largely derived from its post-war centrality and positive reception. In other terms, following also Bourdieu's (1997 spec 168-

³ 'The logic of appropriateness is a perspective that sees human action as driven by rules of appropriate or exemplary behaviour, organized into institutions. [...] Rules are followed because they are seen as natural, rightful, expected, and legitimate. Actors seek to fulfil the obligations encapsulated in a role, an identity, a membership in a political community or group, and the ethos, practices and expectations of its institutions. Embedded in a social collectivity, they do what they see as appropriate for themselves in a specific type of situation.' (March and Olsen, 2008).

169) reference to ‘habitus’ and ‘doxa’, *the idea of what a party should be received from a process of socialization of politics*, leads people to look for, or even require, the particular kind of party they were accustomed to consider appropriate. The consequence is that a ‘good party’ is the one of the golden age of political parties. A party therefore needs to display those pristine features in order to be well received today.

These considerations rest on the suggestion that the party is viewed through the filter of nostalgia, a present day tendency toward ‘retrotopia’, as argued by Zygmund Bauman (2017). According to the latest strands of psychoanalytical literature (Byom, 2001; Sedikides et al., 2008; Routledge et al., 2012) this sentiment reflects positive rather than negative affect. The past is seen as a positive way of ‘making sense’ of an imperfect present (Byom, 2007; Davis, 1979). Nostalgia could even be a ‘desired state’ in the face of the reality. In some occurrences, positive memories could be mingled with sadness for something lost: the Portuguese expression *saudade* and Marcel Proust’s madeleine in his *La recherche du temps perdu* provide fascinating explicit examples of the bitter-sweet flavour of nostalgia.

Indeed, nostalgia pervades contemporary politics and it evokes positive evaluations (Müller, 2002). About two thirds of the European electorate may be classified as nostalgic (De Vreis and Hoffmann, 2018). The party programs of 379 parties in 24 European countries are full of references to an inevitably idealized past (Müller and Proksch, 2024). This pervading sentiment influences the perception of parties.

As argued above, political parties produced a clear set of practices and norms of behaviour at the time of their initial development. These were reinforced at the height of their expansion, emphasising democratic qualities, equal participation of members, and benevolent attention towards their members and the *classe gardée*. These practices and norms have pervaded public opinion. People expect certain figures and institutions to behave in a predictable and appropriate way. Thus, parties are now *expected to observe the norms attributed to them by a ‘collective common conscience’*. Political parties have to show certain traits and abide by certain rules and norms.

Here lies the point of friction. The challenge or trap is that they have to follow the standard *modus operandi* of the 20th-century mass party *that no longer exists* – although, some parties such as the radical populist right are trying to revive it (see Albertazzi and van Kessel, 2021; De Jong, 2021; Sijstermans, 2021). *Parties that diverge from these standard procedures are considered inadequate or even illegitimate* (Katz and Mair, 2018: 8;

Dalton, Scarrow, and Cain, 2006: 250; Saward, 2008: 272; Wolkenstein, 2020: 147).

According to this reasoning, political parties have inevitably failed to meet people’s expectations of predictable behaviour, especially within the party itself. In intra-party life, the promise of working in tune with the ideal of a full egalitarian democracy clashes with the decline in the provision and attractiveness of collective incentives in front of the growing impact of selective incentives. The new neoliberal and individualist *Zeitgeist* of recent decades has led to the demise of collective instances within parties, in favour of individual participation. Emphasis on office- and vote-seeking behaviour (Strom, 1990) instead of intra-party democracy (Harmel and Janda, 1994) has favoured the spread of an image of parties populated by carrier-driven people rather than people devoted to the general interest without any concern for their own personal benefits. This drive away from the original imprint of parties has affected people’s consideration of parties but has not erased the image. Although a generation has been replaced, their positive memory of past party politics has taken hold and spread through direct socialization and through memories and historical accounts. Thus, the logic of the appropriateness of political parties has been reinstated by nostalgia for the past. The conundrum is that nostalgia collides with present-day reality. People demand what parties can no longer deliver in that form.

CONCLUSION

Parties are trapped in the contradiction between expectations and fulfilment. Because they betray the perceived logic of appropriateness attributed to them – transparency, representativeness, democracy, accountability, honesty and listening (see Dommett, 2021; Volgarosson et al., 2021) – people shun them; and are angry and frustrated about this betrayal. And populist parties are exploiting this situation (Albertazzi and van Kessel, 2021).

The same negative feelings pertain to politicians. The ideal type of politician – the *doxa* embraced by most people, socialized to the myth of the golden age of parties – clashes with what is seen as uncaring, distant, self-seeking and privilege-driven behaviour, not to mention misconduct and wrongdoing. Although public expectation ‘is raised to unattainable levels [for] a good politician’ (Clarke, et al. 2018:2), the constant and unremittingly critical reviews of political and personal misdeeds by politicians further depress their image (Corbett, 2014; Flinders, 2012).

Parties of western countries are impeded by the nostalgia of the general public for a party politics bursting

with passion, ideological fervour, commitment to the general interest, active members and supporters, and reliable politicians. This retrotopia (Bauman, 2017) hails back to a golden past, fuelling dissatisfaction and rejection of parties as they are today. At the same time, this nostalgia sparks an opposite sentiment: the desire for parties' renewal, measured by their resilience in the public and electoral spheres, where they continue to arise in good numbers, in some cases even with revived and reformed internal structure and procedures.

Democracy remains inconceivable without parties, as long as we acknowledge the importance, centrality and legitimacy of regulated political conflict in representative systems. The inclusion of parties in the political arena by the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries had precisely that aim. Even in this period of mounting anti-party sentiment, political parties remain central to the process of delegation and even continue to emerge and attract people. The mobilization of people often clashes with the fact that the instrument of engagement is not what they expected. However, nostalgia for the past is also a powerful driver of that search.

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Legitimation (of the parties) and partisan ambivalences

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Abstract. This short note is inspired by Piero Ignazi's article in this issue of IJES-QOE. The basic idea is that the legitimacy of political parties is the outcome of an ongoing, contingent, tension-laden and ambivalent process (legitimization). This ambivalence is not merely circumstantial but embedded in the very logic of partisan action. Which we can characterize as a set of conceptual oppositions between ideals and practices, normative expectations and organizational realities, what parties are and what they do. The article discusses four partisan ambivalences (or dichotomies): part vs. whole, conflict vs. integration, society vs. state, and representation vs. government. In times of democratic regression these ambivalences become disruptive, undermining the credibility of parties as legitimate actors. The crisis of party legitimacy, then is a symptom of a broader transformation in the role of political parties in the 21st century. Transformations that redefine the very function and identity of political parties.

Keywords: partisan ambivalence, legitimization, integration, conflict, intermediation, representation.

The article by Piero Ignazi (2025) published in this issue of *IJES - QOE* prompts numerous reflections – as expected, given that Ignazi is one of the undisputed masters of party analysis, not only in Italy but internationally. What follows is an attempt to develop some of these reflections.

While the study of political parties has long been central to political science, it has received comparatively less attention from the standpoint of the history of ideas and political thought. Foundational contributions – without claiming to be exhaustive – include the classic works of S. Cotta (1959) and G. Sartori (1976), along with those by Daalder (1992), Pomper (1992), and Stokes (1999). More recent analyses from a political science perspective include those by P. Ignazi (2017) and D. Palano (2013). These works have largely focused on the uncertain evolution of the democratic legitimacy of political parties. In this context, the legal perspective also offers a useful comparison (see, for instance, Vecchio 2016).

It is well established that institutions and organizations – including political parties – can be assessed both in terms of their effectiveness in carrying out instrumental tasks and functions, and in terms of their legitimacy, understood as their ability to garner social recognition. This dichotomy was already central to Seymour M. Lipset's reflections in the 1950s and has recently re-emerged in neo-institutionalist thought (e.g., Offe 1995) and in

organizational analysis through the distinction between problem-solving capacity (effectiveness) and sense-making capacity (legitimacy).

In the process of constructing collective actors, there is a constant interaction – and indeed tension – between “identity” and “image.” Organizational identity refers to the features that define an organization in the hearts and minds of those who engage with it. Yet it is also defined by what it represents, including its purpose and values (Hatch 2018, p. 386). From this, a number of macro- and micro-level consequences follow. At the macro level, we observe the tension between what parties claim to be and what they actually do – often described as organizational hypocrisy. At the micro level, this gap helps explain the disillusionment – and thus the exit – of supporters and voters (Hirschman 1982), as well as the “nostalgia” Ignazi refers to: a yearning for a mythologized golden age that reinforces today’s decline in trust and, consequently, the legitimacy of political parties (Mair 1997; Ignazi 2017).

Moreover, legitimacy is an outcome, while legitimation is a process – often a highly uncertain one, as Ignazi notes. In what follows, I propose to interpret this process as one shaped by a series of ambivalent tensions. Specifically, I draw on a number of broad, oppositional conceptual pairs that can help illuminate the logic of party action. These “partisan dilemmas” are derived from the literature on political parties (Panebianco 1982; Schlesinger 1984; see also Raniolo 2013 for an initial presentation). In particular, I refer to the following dichotomies: part vs. whole, conflict vs. integration, society vs. state, and representation vs. government. As we will see, the latter two dichotomies contain within them further tensions: competition vs. identity, and responsibility vs. responsiveness, respectively.

BETWEEN PART AND WHOLE

The word “party” derives from the Latin *partire*, meaning “to divide” – from which comes the notion of partition. In its etymological sense, a party is therefore a part – something distinct from the whole, a fraction of a greater entity (Palano 2013). Politics begins with the elementary act of drawing divisions, and this has far-reaching implications.

The first implication, from the perspective of the party or political unit being constituted, can be termed *integrative*: as Michael Walzer (1999) notes – citing Ignazio Silone – politics is about “choosing one’s comrades,” about selecting the group one will join, remain within, and struggle alongside for shared objectives. This inte-

grative dimension relates to concepts such as cohesion, strength, and degree of party organization – concepts that are empirically vague and ambiguous.

The second implication involves a shift in scale and points to the dialectic between “part” and “whole.” As Giovanni Sartori (1976, p. 25) observed, the rationality of modern political parties rests on three premises:

1. Parties are not factions.
2. A party is a part-of-a-whole.
3. Parties are channels of expression.

Implicit in this formulation is the idea, emerging at the end of the eighteenth century, that the political universe is inherently multicolored. When we affirm that dissent and diversity are healthy for the social body and for the political city, the underlying assumption is that this political city is, and ought to be, made up of parts. The parts we call parties historically gained recognition based on this very assumption (Sartori 1976, p. 22).

It took more than a century of bloody religious wars across Europe and the acute insights of thinkers like David Hume to open the way toward pluralism in modern societies (Pupo 2016). Yet history rarely progresses in straight lines. In fact, it is useful here to recall two potential perverse effects that can result from the part-whole dialectic. Drawing once again on Sartori (1976), we may speak of the excess of either centrifugal or centripetal tendencies.

A political system consumed by factionalism is one in which the parts have overwhelmed the whole. This results in a process of centrifugal fragmentation, marked by two sub-processes – polarization and radicalization – that Sartori considers overlapping, though in reality they are distinct (Dahl’s position on this is closer to ours). Polarization entails the structuring of the political field – and today, increasingly, of society itself – into separate and distant blocs, which tend to reject moderate or tolerant interaction. In such a context, politics loses its regulatory and integrative capacity, and the way is opened to a Hobbesian state of nature. Dominating this landscape is Behemoth, the biblical monster symbolizing discord, sedition, and civil war. Civil life, as Guglielmo Ferrero (1942) put it, is swallowed by a system of fears. One need only consider the strategies of some parties – at times even traditional ones, though more commonly protest movements – that push voters toward extreme positions, fostering “pernicious polarization” (McCoy & Somer 2019), “divisive partisanship” (Sunstein 2019), “tribalism and factious partisanship” (Putnam 2020), and the broader development of radicalized democracies (Morlino & Raniolo 2022). These are all symptoms of a deep malaise within democracy – if not signs of its actual demise (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018).

On the other hand, we face a second risk: the erosion of pluralism and the part-whole dialectic by the gravitational pull of a totalitarian Leviathan – what Nobel laureates Acemoglu and Robinson (2019) call an “unleashed Leviathan.” In this scenario, we are returned to a monistic world in which civil conflict disappears, but with it so does freedom. The pluralism of parties is replaced by monopartitism; the state of parties is transformed into the one-party state, or more precisely, into the party-state. Not all one-party systems are the same – they vary in their intensity of repression and ideological control – hence the distinction between single-party and hegemonic-party systems (Sartori 1976). Still, it is worth emphasizing that while factionalism and radicalization are clear signs (and proximate causes) of democratic crisis and potential collapse, monism is one of the possible outcomes of such a crisis: namely, the establishment of some form of authoritarian rule (Morlino 2011).

This issue has returned to the forefront as leading independent observers – such as Freedom House, the Varieties of Democracy project, and Polity IV – have documented nearly two decades of democratic backsliding. This regression has unfolded along three main trajectories: increasingly authoritarian regimes, unconsolidated new democracies, and the erosion of established democracies. The deeper causes lie in the digital revolution, rising inequality, the resurgence of nationalism and sovereignty discourses, and the return of power politics in international affairs.

Nonetheless, one of the internal factors – arguably the most significant – that accelerates democratic erosion is the transformation of existing parties or the emergence of new ones. These transformations are characterized by extreme personalization of leadership, particularly in electoral competition and media visibility; by centralization of internal party power; by a successful claim to active political powers once in office; and by the decline of accountability mechanisms (Poguntke & Webb 2005).

BETWEEN CONFLICT AND INTEGRATION

Political parties, in their reciprocal relationships and in their interaction with the political system, act both as channels for integrating individuals and groups into the existing political order, and as instruments for modifying or replacing that order (Kirchheimer 1966, trans. 1979, p. 188). They function simultaneously as mechanisms of integration and disintegration, as agents of conflict and of its regulation.

This ambivalence is captured by Alessandro Pizzorno (1996, p. 983), who notes that, on the one hand, parties “organize participation” – which entails a continuous process of socialization and filtering of the amorphous demands emerging from below. On the other hand, through ideological elaboration, parties foster the construction of identities through which they seek recognition, and under which they engage in struggle for the attainment and preservation of power. In this way, they offer coherent bundles of responses (manifestos and programs) to social demands.

Elections themselves represent an “occasion” in which the citizen, through voting, expresses “solidarity with those who think like him” (Pizzorno 2012, p. 204). However, “no regime – least of all a democratic one, which allows for the articulation and organization of all political positions – is entirely devoid of some form of disloyal opposition” (Linz 1978, trans. 1981, p. 56), which challenges the very legitimacy of the authorities and institutions.

It is therefore essential to understand, in any given regime, the weight, configuration, and causes behind the presence of such anti-system forces. According to Hans Daalder (1966, p. 65), for a variety of historical and structural reasons, European political systems during their initial democratization phases experienced the emergence of anti-system parties and disloyal formations.

In general, such disloyal or anti-system oppositions tend to be minoritarian in consolidated democracies, becoming influential only during periods of crisis or dysfunction. The picture becomes more complex when we consider hybrid cases alongside loyal (pro-system) and disloyal (anti-system) oppositions – these hybrid formations, which we may call semi-loyal oppositions, are even harder to identify. Moreover, over time, the attitudes of groups and parties toward the political regime may shift significantly.

Parties that were once anti-system may evolve toward semi-acceptance, and eventually full integration, even reaching positions of power. Conversely, the opposite trajectory is also possible, where a party undergoes radicalization, pushing it toward greater systemic incompatibility. This is partly what is occurring today in many mature democracies, with the rise of populist parties and leaders, the new far-right wave (see Ignazi 2003), and the radicalization of many conservative parties – with the most striking case being that of the American Republicans.

Not coincidentally, Ignazi (2017), echoing Katz, recently reiterated the risk that anti-party and anti-system parties “could represent the next stage in party development” (2006).

BETWEEN SOCIETY AND STATE

As Norberto Bobbio (1985, p. 26) observed, “Parties have one foot in civil society and one foot in the institutions [...] in fact, they do not entirely belong to either civil society or the State.” One of the most common ways to define political parties is to show that they perform the function of selecting, aggregating, and ultimately transmitting demands originating from civil society, which are destined to become the subject of political decision-making.

It is no coincidence, as Bobbio reminds us by referring to Paolo Farneti (1973), that the notion of a “political society” was introduced precisely to enrich the classical liberal dichotomy between civil society and the State. Political parties are the most relevant actors within this intermediary realm.

More recently, Thomas Poguntke (2006, p. 106) has reaffirmed that “parties are intermediaries that link society and the institutions of democratic government,” emphasizing – much like Bobbio – that in order to perform this bridging function, they must be anchored in both spheres: in state institutions (such as parliaments, governments, and bureaucracies) and in society (*ibid.*).

We might further add that this intermediary role is especially salient in the case of externally originated or socially rooted parties.

A different approach to exploring the mechanisms of political mediation and linkage – extending beyond the democratic context – was proposed by Kay Lawson (1980; see also Lawson and Merkl 1988; Römmele, Farrell, and Ignazi 2005; Dalton, Farrell, and McAllister 2011). Lawson’s starting point is the concept of linkage, which – while similar – is not entirely reducible to the notion of “mediation.” Linkage refers to “a connection, typically implying some form of interaction” (Lawson and Merkl 1988, p. 14) between distinct territorial levels or units, among which there is mutual benefit in maintaining a relationship.

Parties therefore serve as linking agents, specialized in maintaining connections between society and the political system, or, alternatively, between citizens-voters and institutions. When such linkage is effective – meaning it operates bidirectionally – the political system is both stable and legitimate in its persistence. However, linkage can also become dysfunctional or unsatisfactory, or deteriorate over time. In such cases, alternative linking agents emerge – movements, interest groups, protest or anti-political formations, even bureaucracies or the judiciary – which attempt to take the place of parties.

In his recent work, repeatedly cited, Ignazi (2017, p. 224) notes that “the evaluation of political parties across Europe tends to be negative.” There are many indicators

of this trend: declining electoral turnout, waning party identification, eroding trust in parties and politicians, falling membership, and the ineffectiveness of collective, purposive, and emotional incentives – what Ignazi calls symbolic-collective resources.

Conversely, a substantial body of literature has pointed out that parties which are increasingly “minimal” in their relationship with society are becoming more “maximal” in their relationship with the state – benefiting from financial resources and distributing selective-material incentives (see also Kopecky and Mair 2006; Di Mascio 2012).

BETWEEN REPRESENTATION AND GOVERNMENT

This pair of concepts, quite familiar in political discourse, is polysemic in nature. It denotes, simultaneously: distinct principles of political legitimacy (ascending vs. descending); specialized institutional structures (“theatre bodies” vs. executive apparatuses, in the words of Massimo Severo Giannini, 1986); and divergent operational and decision-making logics – the former expressing the need to give voice to diversity and pluralism, the latter oriented toward reducing complexity and emphasizing efficiency.

Moreover, the democratization of industrial societies led to a structural differentiation in the command architecture of the state (Pizzorno 2012): one part dependent on elections (political representation), and the other recruited based on specific competences aligned with the functional demands of performance-based administration (i.e., executive government). This opened up spaces for experts, technocratic actors, and non-majoritarian institutions.

Parties are positioned at the core of this institutional field. They are simultaneously invested with the conflicting imperatives of amplifying pluralism and streamlining decision-making – of transmitting demands and exercising delegated authority (Pizzorno 1980). Naturally, parties vary in how they perform these functions, depending on:

1. their origin (internally vs. externally generated),
2. their social base (elite vs. mass parties),
3. their ideological orientation (conservative vs. progressive),
4. their role (government vs. opposition),
5. and their historical-geographical context (American vs. European parties; contemporary vs. traditional).

Typically, the first element in each pair is more strongly oriented toward governance, while the second leans toward representation.

However, these distinctions have largely faded since the end of the “Thirty Glorious Years”, with the rise and global spread of neoliberalism – from Reagan’s America and Thatcher’s Britain – followed by socialist austerity and then the Third Way. The 2008 Great Recession further deepened a contradiction between demands for redistribution and the practical limits – if not the impossibility – of meeting those demands.

In this scenario, the original dilemma has morphed into a tension between responsiveness (the party’s attentiveness and commitment to respond to its social base) and responsibility (its obligation to respect budgetary, international, neocorporate, and technocratic constraints). This has led scholars to describe the emergence of “semi-sovereign democracies” (Schmidt 1996) or “post-democracy” (Crouch 2003).

Richard Katz (2006) notes that parties adapt to this situation through two main strategies: the deflation of public expectations and the evasion of responsibility.

“The lowering of expectations is most evident in the rhetoric of the Third Way, in which even nominally leftist parties abandon public welfare provision in favor of market efficiency. By shifting control over monetary policy to an independent central bank, parties further distance themselves from responsibility – an effect magnified when this delegation is coupled with a stability pact that effectively relinquishes discretion over fiscal policy. By devolving political responsibility to others, parties in effect limit the range of policy choices and shrink the spectrum of issues over which they can plausibly compete. In this way, devolution [...] also reflects a transformation of parties from power-seeking to responsibility-avoiding entities.”

These dynamics have produced deep internal tensions within both left-wing parties and protest parties (often referred to as neo-populist), especially upon entering government, as occurred across Southern Europe (Morlino and Raniolo 2022).

In reality, the representation–government ambivalence contains two further tensions. The first is foundational to democracy itself: the pair inclusion vs. exclusion – which, for Steven Lukes, lies at the heart of the left–right distinction. Norberto Bobbio likewise emphasized equality as the key democratic value (see both essays in Bosetti 1993). The democratic, representative, multi-class state is premised on the expectation of democratic deepening (Dahl 1971), emancipatory politics (Giddens 1994), and human empowerment across political, cultural, and economic dimensions (Welzel 2011).

Yet, despite democratic progress, even in mature democracies, freedom (civil and political) and equality tend to diverge. The result, as noted above, is a growing

elitization of democracy, combining features of illiberal democracies (Zakaria 1997) – without rights – and exclusive democracies (Mastropaolo 2023) – without meaningful participation, or with domesticated forms of it.

CONCLUSIONS

Essentially, the legitimacy of political parties cannot be regarded as a stable or consolidated attribute, but rather as the outcome of an ongoing, contingent, and tension-laden process – a process of legitimization. As Ignazi reminds us, this process is often uncertain, fragile, and ambivalent.

This ambivalence is not merely circumstantial but structural, embedded in the very logic of partisan action. It manifests in the internal dilemmas that parties must continuously navigate, organized here through a set of conceptual dichotomies

Each of these oppositions encapsulates a deeper tension between normative expectations and organizational realities, between ideals and practices, between what parties claim to be and what they are perceived to do.

In times of democratic expansion, parties have managed to balance these tensions by adapting institutional mechanisms and maintaining robust societal linkages. Yet in periods of democratic regression – as we witness today with the rise of populism, polarization, and technocratic insulation – these tensions become disruptive, undermining the credibility of parties as legitimate actors.

The crisis of party legitimacy, then, is not simply a decline in trust or membership, but a symptom of a broader transformation in the role of political parties within contemporary democracies: from mediators of pluralism to managers of constrained governance. In this new context, the challenge is not merely to restore legitimacy, but to reimagine the very function and identity of political parties in the 21st century.

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Party crisis, what party crisis?

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Abstract. This paper explores Piero Ignazi's thesis that today there is a crisis of political parties rooted in a disjuncture between what parties do today (how they behave) and public expectations, which are rooted in nostalgia for a past 'golden era'. Exploring the two actors essential to this thesis (voters and parties) reveals weaknesses in the argument. Regarding voters, the thesis is insufficiently sustained empirically, with further work needed both on a generational issue and the core issue of the nature of the public dissatisfaction with parties. Regarding parties, the thesis largely overlooks a particular party family (populist parties) which, it could be argued, has done and is doing precisely what Ignazi has said is needed. In that respect, Ignazi's thesis seems to be directed not at parties per se but at one specific set of parties: mainstream parties. Yet, the final paradox is that the mainstream parties of yesteryear, to a large extent, no longer exist, so Ignazi is looking in the wrong direction.

Keywords: political parties, crisis of parties, mainstream parties, populist parties, retropia.

PARTY BETRAYAL

Piero Ignazi (2025) adds a putatively original idea to the explanation for what he postulates is a crisis of political parties: nostalgia for the past. Ignazi traces the roots of discontent with parties to a combination of factors, which are ontological (concerning the party's very existence) and structural/behavioural (what parties do – badly - or don't do). While interrelated, Ignazi argues that the first is not, ultimately, the driver of dissatisfaction with parties. People, he argues, do not write off parties as such: "Although parties are held in low esteem and consideration, still there is no other game in town." Indeed, parties still display a degree of resilience. 'Party government' is still the universal model, people continue to join parties and form new parties, and not all parties are seen as bad by all voters.

This leads him to the second aspect (structural/behavioural) where he argues that the focus of dissatisfaction is rooted less in their performance (in terms of policy outputs) but in their practices: not what they do but how they do it. To argue this, he establishes a dichotomy of 'popular democracy' and (Schumpeterian) 'electoral democracy', arguing that "parties have taken a path that makes them diverge from their original imprint" as a "participatory

collective organization” dedicated to achieving collective goals into other organizational models based on individual, office-seeking goals. In this, parties “abandoned the traditional functions of representation and channeling, on which rested their *input role* to decision-makers, and instead favoured an *output role* in terms of efficient problem-solver, public agency.” They became “agents of the state devoted to running elections”, where the need for responsiveness to citizens was minimal. In short, the crisis of parties is rooted not in parties per se, but in the current offer (offer of what parties stand for). “The demand for good parties and good politicians remains.”

So far so good, and there are few who would contest this articulation or re-articulation of an argument first expounded by authors such as Mair (2013). Ignazi, however, takes the argument further by attempting to answer the question which is a corollary of this argument: if the demand for good parties remains, what, for the public, makes up a ‘good party’?

On this he is clear: it is precisely the ‘popular democracy’ which parties abandoned for which the public has a longing: “Parties of western countries are impeded by the nostalgia of the general public for a party politics bursting with passion, ideological fervour, commitment to the general interest, active members and supporters, and reliable politicians.” This betrayal by parties of what they should have been (transparent, representative, democratic, accountable, honest and listening) is at the root of public anger and frustration: “The consequence is that a ‘good party’ is what there was in the golden age of political parties. A party therefore needs to display those pristine features in order to be well received today.”

It is a novel argument, but does it hold water? We can approach this question by looking at the two main players in this scenario: the voters on the one hand and the political parties on the other.

VOTERS AND NOSTALGIA FOR THE PAST

Ignazi’s theoretical tenet on which his argument rests is that voters’ perceptions of parties are relative not absolute, that irrespective of how much they might or might not aspire to a rational judgement or independent evaluation in absolute terms, voters are influenced by their expectations of what parties should be and should do. And that influence, he argues, is primarily channelled through ‘nostalgia for the past’, which is a strong motivator for public feeling today.

He briefly references, but doesn’t explore, Zygmund Bauman’s concept of ‘retrotopia’, which is a sociocultural

phenomenon characterised by a longing for the past (a perceived ‘golden era’) alongside a disillusionment with the future. Bauman (2017) argues that in the 21st century people have lost faith in forward-looking ideas of progress and reform because of the level of uncertainties, insecurities and threats. They therefore tend to look backwards to the past for security and guidance. In short, Utopian thinking which used to predominate in political reflection (in other words, a quest for ‘progress’...) has been replaced by retrotopian thinking. This phenomenon can emerge in different political, social and cultural settings. Populist politics (for example, ‘Brexit’, ‘Make America Great Again’) is commonly identified with nostalgia for a nationalistic past, free from the problems brought by immigration, globalisation and economic insecurity. (e.g. Elçi, 2022, Hatherley 2016, Kenny 2017).

The argument at a general level has been well-rehearsed and applied. The question here is whether this sort of thinking translates specifically into nostalgia for a golden era of parties and party government; that is, whether this apparent cultural predisposition to nostalgia for the past registers in relation to how political parties once were, with a longing for a return to the era of those parties. Do people look at parties today and use the parties of yesteryear as their benchmark or yardstick?

Ignazi uses some secondary literature around the question, but without really directly confronting it in empirical terms. He informs us that “About two thirds of the European electorate may be classified as nostalgic”, but this sort of statement and the single source he uses would really have to be unpacked to have any leverage. I like looking at old photographs of my home town posted to a Facebook Group called “Memories are Made of This”. That probably makes me nostalgic, but I’m not sure what else that is telling us (for example, I may like looking at the photographs but am not sure I would want to step back into that world..).

Some detailed empirical work would be needed to test this idea/hypothesis, and the findings may convey levels of complexity that might give rise to caution in going too far with Ignazi’s idea. As examples, we might draw attention to two issues.

Generational issue

The first is the generational issue, which is not explored by Ignazi. That is who exactly are the nostalgic two-thirds? Nostalgia is commonly defined as ‘a sentimental longing or wistful affection for a period in the past.’ A key question is whether it is possible for nostalgia to work with this sort of influence on people

who never directly experienced the period itself. Ignazi seems convinced it can: “[The] drive away from the original imprint of parties has affected people’s consideration of parties but has not erased the image. Although a generation has been replaced, the positive memory of past party politics has taken hold and spread through direct socialization and through memories and historical accounts. Thus, the logic of the appropriateness of political parties has been reinstated by nostalgia for the past.” Yet, while a degree of agency in profiling an unexperienced past is feasible, it is surely true that nostalgia – if it does have an impact -- is likely to have a much more powerful effect on one if the ‘longing’ is rooted in a real, lived experience.

That point is reinforced in the specific case that Ignazi is using. Nostalgia can work in complex ways, but to be nostalgic for a ‘golden age’ of political parties’ would require one of two things: either a good memory of that era (meaning having been of voting age at the time and therefore today in their 60s – if the ‘golden age’ began to wane in the 1970s) or subject to very clear and attractive representations of that era by an agency or agencies. Is it feasible that young people today who never experienced the ‘golden age’ of parties have nostalgia for the specific type of parties that existed back then? Are they all looking at old photos of parties from a previous era they did not witness that are prompting feelings of nostalgia inside? Do we see in the popular consciousness, or in the press, or in social media, representations of political parties ‘in the good old days’ (or ‘back in the day’)? Common sense and observance suggests not, and if not, then something else other than nostalgia must be causing public dissatisfaction with parties.

The nature of the dissatisfaction: is it with what parties do or with parties per se?

That leads to the second point, which is Ignazi’s conviction that it is not parties per se with which the public has truck, it is the simply what parties get up to – if only they would behave as they used to do!

On the one hand, this tends to overlook the obvious, which is the lack of alternatives. If political scientists themselves cannot come up with a suitable alternative to ‘party government’, then how much significance can we read into claims that the public have *not* given up on parties? In short, it is difficult to envisage a democratic system without political parties and party government at its heart.

On the other hand, it also overlooks evidence (albeit complex and not singularly clear) that, despite the apparent inevitability of parties, people (and young people in

particular) may be falling out of love with traditional mechanisms of representation such as parties. This does not mean that they are disaffected with democracy itself (Grassi, Portos, Felicetti 2024), rather that the way they mobilise politically is shaped more by their values than any notion of party loyalty (which was of course fundamental to the ‘golden era’ of parties).

This likely downgrades the role and importance of parties, and can lead to preferences for more charismatic, decisive leaders than parties of the old school, something which the rise of social media has enhanced. Social media facilitates a focus on engaging with personalities rather than party platforms. This does not mean that young people are necessarily looking for authoritarian responses rather greater decisiveness and responsiveness than the traditional forms of representation can provide to rise to the extreme challenges of today (climate change, economic insecurity, wars, social justice). Moreover, because of this, young people appear to be far more issue-driven than ideologically-driven (the latter being another feature surely of the ‘golden age’ of parties), but it would be wrong to equate the former with somehow embodying less fervour or passion.

In short, it seems more likely that young people today are driven less by nostalgia for the past (or a representation of that past) than the idea of not being chained and governed by conventional ideas about the role of political parties which they see as potentially hindering the search for solutions to the big problems of the world.

POLITICAL PARTIES THEMSELVES

The second player in Ignazi’s scenario are the political parties themselves. His contention is clear: “the idea of what a party should be received from a process of socialization of politics, leads people to look for, or even require, the particular kind of party they were accustomed to consider appropriate. The consequence is that a ‘good party’ is what there was in the golden age of political parties. A party therefore needs to display those pristine features in order to be well received today.” The question, therefore, is whether political parties have cottoned on to this and are attempting to re-invent themselves through a return to the past.

On the one hand, we might say that, within the logic of Ignazi’s argument, of course they are not! The premise of Ignazi’s argument is precisely that the crisis of parties is rooted in their departure from the mass model of party of the ‘golden era’ and their failure to re-adopt it. And he re-emphasises the point that in order to be successful parties today have to confront a challenge: “The

challenge or trap is that they have to observe the standard modus operandi of the 20th-century mass party that no longer exists ...” And he goes on to argue that “Parties that diverge from these standard procedures are considered inadequate or even illegitimate” and that “political parties have inevitably failed to meet people’s expectations of predictable behaviour”.

To anyone who has studied political parties of the ‘golden era’ there is surely little to dispute in the above contention that parties today are nothing like the mass parties of yesteryear. But the issue is not that, but rather why parties continue to fail in this regard, if it is a matter of returning to their roots. At this point, we should return to the quotation from Ignazi above because it is not actually complete. Completing the sentence is revealing for he writes: “The challenge or trap is that they have to observe the standard modus operandi of the 20th-century mass party that no longer exists - *although, parties such as the radical populist right are trying to revive it.*” (my emphasis). It is curious that populist parties do not, in fact, figure in Ignazi’s analysis beyond this fleeting reference and, over the page, one other, when he writes: “Parties are trapped in the contradiction between expectations and fulfilment. Because they betray the perceived logic of appropriateness attributed to them – transparency, representativeness, democracy, accountability, honesty and listening ... – people shun them and are angry and frustrated about this betrayal. *And populist parties are exploiting this situation.*” (my emphasis).

So, political parties are in crisis because they are not behaving as they used to do, (and what they used to do is what the voters apparently want)..., except that some parties *are*, in fact, doing so (populist parties). And, since we are fully aware that it is populist parties that have constituted the most successful party family of the past fifteen years, the implication we are meant to draw, one assumes, is that Ignazi’s thesis must be right.

Of course, one might want to discuss whether this is, in fact, what populist parties are trying to do, and that would require a more detailed empirical and theoretical analysis than his article provides. We might try to challenge Ignazi that his argument is not articulated strongly enough and that we do not believe that that is what populist parties are trying to do. Yet, Ignazi could and probably would defend his case by delving deeper into the sources he already cites and other empirical evidence to show that a sufficiently strong case could probably be made for populist parties attempting to revive politics in some form, and that some (maybe much) of that focuses on some kind of a glorious lost (nationalistic?) past (e.g. Betz and Johnson 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2018), although, it has to be said, there might be

considerable variation in the exact nature of this retroopia (e.g. Martín, Paradés and Zagórski (2023). So, let us leave aside (or lose) that argument, *pace* Bull..

But if that is the case, we should then ask why Ignazi is, at the same time, advancing the idea of a crisis of parties? The thesis he expounds at the beginning of his article is that there is a crisis of parties rooted in nostalgia for the past, yet we find by the end of the article that this is not actually the case because we have a whole new family of parties which is doing precisely what he says parties should be doing, for surely it is the case that populist parties, if they are doing anything, are providing “a party politics bursting with passion, ideological fervour, commitment to the general interest, active members and supporters, and reliable politicians.” (even if some may question the final factor). Seen in this logic there is no crisis of parties and his argument falls on its head. So we might ask him, what is your problem?

The answer to this conundrum lies surely in something else, that this is not the sort or revitalisation of which Ignazi was thinking. Despite the principled composition of his points (“passion”, “ideological “fervour” etc.) he is thinking of how this need for revitalisation applies to so-called “mainstream” parties, not to new kids on the block. It is mainstream failure which has let in the new kids who seem to be doing precisely what the mainstream parties should have done and should be doing, but, for some reason, are not welcome to be included in his analysis.

But to that we may ask what “mainstream” parties?? Do “mainstream” parties exist anymore? One wonders how many mainstream parties from the ‘golden age’ are still with us today. If we take Ignazi’s own country (Italy), there is barely any resemblance between the political parties and party system of the ‘golden age’ and those of today. And if that is the case, how do we revitalise something that has already gone? We end up with a situation where the model of the mass party is extinct and the mainstream parties as vehicles that embodied it are to a large extent extinct. Small wonder that revitalisation (according to the principles embodied in the mass party model) are being pursued by new parties which are not being adequately recognised by Ignazi for their achievement in regard to the challenge he has articulated.

CONCLUSION: RETROPIA?

Ignazi starts his article arguing that there is a crisis of parties that is a crisis in terms of what they do not what they are, motivated by nostalgia for the past (retroopia) on the part of voters, and that what parties need to

do is go back to the principles of the past that governed their behaviour and all will be good.

There are some questions as to whether that is the case with voters, and certainly deeper empirical evidence would have to be explored to justify the assertion. Yet, even if true, when we apply the argument to parties, we find that Ignazi effectively undermines his own thesis by treading gingerly (but certainly not fully) onto the terrain of populist parties, which have done or are doing precisely what he says parties have not been doing. So where is the crisis?

This suggests that his concern or focus, despite the generality of the argument, is not with parties as such but with a particular set of parties that we might call “mainstream”: those parties that we remember as being associated with the ‘golden age’. To the extent that these parties still exist today, they are, in his eyes, shadows of their former selves and this explains their crisis. If so, then Ignazi’s thesis is not exploring a crisis of parties but rather the decline of one set of parties and the success of another, except he fails to explore fully the latter and whether and to what degree their success is owed to addressing the issues he has identified as being at the root of so-called mainstream party failure and decline. And possibly the cause of that is an element of *retropia* on his own part.

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